HISTORIC CHARLESTON FOUNDATION

Aiken-Rhett House Tour

Transcribed from 2018 Mobile Audio Tour
www.historiccharleston.org/app

Store Room and Intro

Welcome to the Aiken Rhett House. You're standing in the store room, a tiny part of a vast cellar. This might seem like a typical basement to you, but the Aiken Rhett House is anything but typical. It's unique because many of the interiors have survived relatively untouched from the mid-19th century, and we are doing everything in our power to keep it that way! Historic Charleston Foundation decided to *preserve* this house as found, rather than restore it to a certain time period or style. That means the objects in this room, like this pine table, and most of the objects in the house, are original. In other words they're *very* old—and your skin contains oils and acids that can be harmful to them, so please don't touch!

Now, let's take you back to 1820.

John Robinson, a Charleston merchant, built this house. But in 1825, he lost five ships and had to liquidate his assets. William Aiken Senior, president of the South Carolina Canal and Railroad Company, jumped on the deal, but he didn't get to enjoy it for long. In 1831, he died in a carriage accident.

His wife, Henrietta Wyatt Aiken, and their only son, William Aiken Junior, inherited the house. William Aiken Junior served as Governor of South Carolina from 1844-1846, so we'll refer to him as Governor Aiken**.** Governor Aiken moved in in1833 with his new wife and they got right to renovating. The house underwent two periods of renovations--one in the 1830's and one in the 1850's. If you face the door to the gift shop where you came in, on your left you can see an illustration of the changes that reoriented the house's entrance, added an art gallery, and more.

Before the Civil War, the Aiken family, as well as ten to twenty enslaved Africans, lived here. Governor Aiken was one of the largest slave owners in US history and, therefore, one of the wealthiest men in the state. He owned over 800 slaves, most of whom worked on his rice plantation, called Jehossee, on an island south of Charleston. Those who weren't on that plantation worked at his other properties, for his railroad business, or here at the Aiken Rhett House.

This property's outbuildings and slave quarters are some of the most well-preserved in Charleston, giving us a unique opportunity to explore the spaces where the enslaved worked, lived, and slept. Once you're ready: Go through the *wooden door* and left into the hallway. When you reach the *end* of the hallway, enter the r*oom on your right*.

Servant's Hall

You've entered the servant's hall. Notice the kitchen tools near the fireplace, food storage cabinets on the opposite wall, and a table in the center of the room.

This was one of the busiest places in the house. Imagine: The Aikens are having a formal dinner party and enslaved domestic servants, cooks and footmen rush around to make sure everything is perfect for dinner.

In 1846, at least seven enslaved adults and their six children lived at the Aiken-Rhett House. Two women – Ann Greggs and Dorcas Richardson – lived here with their families, and one of these women may have been the Aikens' cook. Depending on the day, the Charleston heat can still make this area hard to be in – can you feel the humidity today?

Before you leave, check out the metal gas fixture on the ceiling in the center of the room: gas lighting was added sometime in the mid-1800s and electric wiring was added in the early 1900s. The Foundation has preserved both gas and electric fixtures—keep an eye out for them to see another layer in the evolution of this house.

Enslaved people like Ann Greggs and Dorcas Richardson used this room to garnish and prep food and carry it up to the house using the back staircase directly across the hall. They also gathered here to eat their meals.

We don't know much about what urban enslaved people ate, but you can bet that it didn't compare to what they were preparing for their owners. Though it was more common on plantations, urban slaves also died from malnutrition and starvation – even those belonging to the wealthiest of slaveholders. In 1857, one of Governor Aiken's slaved died at his King Street property, just around the corner. Her death record states she died of marasmus, also known as severe malnutrition. Her name was Chloe and she was seven years old.

When you're finished looking around, Turn right out of the room and walk into the work yard. I'll see you there!

Workyard

Hopefully it's a beautiful day in Charleston. See the two buildings on either side of the yard? The building on your left housed stables and a carriage house, and the building on your right housed a kitchen and laundry. Both had living quarters on the second floor.

Before we explore them, turn and face the back of the main house. Above the door you just came from, there is a rectangular black fixture, the remnants of a call bell system. There were connected with wiring to most rooms in the house, so the Aikens could call enslaved people to their service at a moment's notice.

Look to your left, past the window on the same facade, all the way to the wall, and you'll see another fixture which still has wires coming out of it. Now, look all the way up, and notice that between the third and fourth story of windows, there are several small black hooks, all part of the call bell system.

Feel free to explore the whole yard while we tell you a little more.

Running a household of this size (and to the Aiken's standards) relied on many hours of enslaved labor. Carriage drivers, cooks, butlers, gardeners, laundresses, nursemaids, carpenters, and seamstresses. It's difficult to know the details of their day to day lives, but the preservation of these spaces allows us to begin to understand what their lives would have been like.

See the high walls surrounding the property? Many properties in antebellum Charleston had walls just like this as a way to control the enslaved, due to the fear of enslaved uprisings. It all started in 1822 when a formerly enslaved man named Denmark Vesey was executed for plotting a revolt. After authorities uncovered the plot, many slaveholders took steps to further isolate the enslaved by enclosing their lots with high walls. Governor Aiken had these walls built ten years after Vesey's execution.

Most work yards in Charleston were utilitarian, but these spaces were more ornate, probably because the Aikens and their friends would have passed through on their way to their carriages and the gardens further back.

Archaeology is an important tool for literally uncovering information about the past. In this case, research proved that there were ornamental gardens, decorative garden follies, and an allee of magnolias down the center of the yard. The trees you see today are descendants of those trees!

The small structures in the back corners are privies – outdoor toilets. Between the privy and carriage house, you'll see a brick structure which was an ornamental garden building. Imagine the Aikens reading books from their European travels or having a leisurely stroll through the gardens while enslaved Africans were hard at work in the yard – maybe washing clothes or tending to the horses, just a few feet away. Look up to see the house windows that peer over

this yard to really get a sense of the lack of privacy and disparity between the enslaved and the slaveholder.

Plot twist! It may be strange to imagine, but you are standing on the site of a Revolutionary War battlefield. And not just any battlefield, but part of a network of siege trenches dug by the British in the largest victory by British forces during the Revolution.

Archaeologists have been chasing these trenches for over 15 years, and in the summer of 2017, Foundation staff found them right here… more or less by accident!

Once you've taken a final walk out here in the workyard, head back in the direction where you first exited the house, and let's enter the kitchen through the green door facing the main house.

Kitchen and Ancillary Kitchen

You've entered the main kitchen. The bulk of cooking took place here, directly under the enslaved living quarters. The stone slab in front of the stove prevented stray embers from reaching the floor and sending the whole place up in flames. This stove was the height of stove technology when the Aikens installed it in the 1830s. It made temperature control easier, which was a useful tool for whipping up all sorts of fancy French-inspired dishes for the elaborate parties they threw for Charleston society – sometimes for up to five hundred guests! It would have taken hours to heat up. So it would probably have been kept hot all day, even in the sweltering Charleston summer, just in case the Aikens needed something immediately. It was no easy task to prepare multiple course meals for a wealthy family in Charleston!

On the left is a rice polishing mortar and pestle, used to get the husks off of rice before it was sent to the market. This is one of the few things you're allowed to touch, so give it a go!

Charleston was a seaport with food options a plenty: Chocolate from Central America, exotic spices, and even bananas that had just come from the Caribbean a few days earlier. These ingredients, including chocolate and bananas, very exotic at the time, mixed with the traditional recipes of the enslaved, formed the beginning of the Lowcountry cuisine Charleston is still known for today. Archaeological discoveries on the property show that tomatoes, okra, corn, and greens were common vegetables and were often served with meat like chicken, beef and pork. They also found remnants of oysters, turtle, catfish, sea bass, and trout that would have been served in soups and main dishes.

When you're ready, move into the next room. This was a laundry room when the Aikens purchased the property, but they expanded this whole building and turned this room into an ancillary kitchen.

Stand facing the fireplace and look up towards the top of the wall, and to the right. Can you see those traces of yellow paint? Many scholars assumed that all enslaved spaces were whitewashed – why would anyone bother decorating for the people they claimed to own as property? But thanks to the modern day science of paint analysis, we know that these walls were painted in vibrant colors. Dyes and pigments leave a distinct chemical signature even after they've faded helping us link them to specific years or timeframes. So not only do we know what colors were here, we know when they were painted!

What we still don't know is why Governor Aiken decorated these spaces at all. One theory is that he was feeling pressure from abolitionists.

Enslaved Quarters, Part 1

Standing outside, take a look at the top floor of the building. There are five rooms in this building and two in the building across the yard above the stables. They were probably divided by family, with single men living above the stables, and families and single women here. There would have been simple furniture like beds or even just bedrolls, tables and chairs, and a few meager possessions.

Written records about the lives of enslaved people are few and far between, so architectural elements – like the closed off nature of their living quarters – can give us important clues. The enslaved left virtually no written records and slave owners were not keen to record or even acknowledge the humanity of those they were oppressing. These dehumanizing views of people as 'possessions' meant their lives were only rarely recorded, and almost always from the oppressor's point of view. Furthermore, names are often spelled several different ways, ages are uncertain, and family relationships are difficult to tease apart.

The Foundation has been able to piece together a small amount of information about some of the enslaved on this property.

We don’t always know who did what or who lived where, but as you move through the rooms we’d like to introduce you to a few of the people we do know about.

Walk back into the building and up the stairs to enter the enslaved quarters. When you get to the top, turn left and go to the farthest room at the end of the hall. As you walk, do you notice a temperature change? Many of the rooms only have windows into the hallways, and no exterior windows overlooking neighboring lots. That restricted the air ventilation and direct access to sunlight, and also made it more difficult for enslaved people to communicate.

What do you see in the room? There are pegboards for clothing on the walls, curtain hooks, tack for floor coverings, and a hook for hanging a picture or a mirror. This is one of the only rooms with direct access to sunlight and fresh air, and – with the shutters—even privacy. But it’s also directly above the kitchen, which means it could become unbearably hot.

Let’s imagine that this room and perhaps one more was shared by the Richardsons: Dorcas, her husband Sambo, and their children Charles, Rachael, Victoria, Elizabeth, and Julia. Dorcas Richardson was only eleven years old when she had her first child. She probably worked in the main house as a personal slave to Harriet Aiken or her daughter Henrietta Aiken Rhett. In that time, did she dream of what she could become if she ever gained her freedom? If she did, she must have been proud: After the Civil War, Dorcas took a job as the matron of the Colonel Shaw Colored Orphan Asylum, an orphanage for African American children.

Not only did she care for orphans full-time, she opened bank accounts for her children and other formerly enslaved people who lived here. Her signature on the accounts tells us that she was

literate, despite having lived most of her life in a time when it was illegal for enslaved people to read or write. Later in life, she opened her own fruit store in Charleston.

Enslaved Quarters, Part 2

Exit this room and turn right into the second room and let's talk about another enslaved family who lived and worked here: the Greggs. Tom and Ann Greggs were enslaved at the house and probably had two children: Phoebe and Henry Greggs. Dorcas Richardson is recorded as their aunt in bank records, but their actual relationship is unclear. Before the Civil War, Phoebe Gregg's name was in and out of census records, so she could have been sent to work at Jehossee plantation for periods of time. Enslaved servants cared for other people's children when their own could be sent away at any moment.

Phoebe Greggs was also able to read and write. Perhaps Dorcas Richardson taught her and her own children. It's impossible to say for sure, but it is compelling to imagine them huddled up by fire light clandestinely learning their ABC's. We don't know what happened to Ann and Tom Greggs after the Civil War, but their daughter Phoebe Greggs became a dressmaker and her brother Henry Greggs later returned to work on this property.

Exit this room and continue right down the hall, and peek into the room just before the stairs. It's closed, it's dark, and it doesn't have any exterior windows, so try to use a flashlight to peer in (if you have one).

Enslaved Quarters, Part 3

Continue to the fourth room on your right. You'll see a sitz bath on the left, remains of a chair, a fireplace ahead of you, and a table on the right.

Perhaps Betsy Crutchfield and her children: Thomas, Jane and William Crutchfield shared this room. Betsy Crutchfield was a personal slave to Harriet Lowndes and came to this property when Harriet married the Governor. Gaps in her time at the Aiken Rhett house mean she may have been sent to Jehossee. Perhaps she was separated from her children and Dorcas Richardson saw to them while she was away – in fact, Betsy worked at the orphanage with Dorcas after the Civil War – maybe they even embarked on their careers together after Emancipation. Her children Thomas and Jane even lived at the orphanage *with* them. Betsy Crutchfield died in 1889 of exhaustion and paralysis. Her youngest son, William, lived in Charleston with his wife, mother, children, and members of the Richardson family. His descendents are still in the area today.

Enslaved Quarters, Part 4

Exit this room and walk into the last room. This room could have belonged to Jacob Gaillard, a butler and occasional coachman to Governor Aiken. He was working here in 1896, thirty years after the end of the Civil War. Emancipation didn't end tense race relations and economic injustice in Charleston, and domestic servants of African descent struggled to make a living**.** Starting in the early 1900s and up to at least 1961, various family employees were living and working in these quarters. If you look closely, you can see places where electric wiring was added in the mid-1900s as the room continued to be used.

Do you notice any bright colors? Though Hurricane Hugo damaged this room, look for the surviving flecks of bright blue pigment. That's called ultramarine, it was a rare and expensive wall paint in the 19th century. So why is it here? The paint here matches blue paint used for decorative elements in the main house and it's probably leftover pigment from renovations. Look for the other paint layers, indicating several generations of redecorating in these spaces.

When you're finished looking around, turn and go back down the stairs to the yard. The Richardsons, the Greggs, the Crutchfields, and Jacob Gaillard are just a handful of the people who were enslaved and worked on this property. There are many more enslaved people and paid employees whose life stories have yet to be uncovered. Listen to some of their names as you make your way back down into the yard: Hannah Brown, Thomas Polite, Patsey Polite, Rachel Ann, Edward Singleton, Mary Middleton, George Ansley, Julia Small, James Rhodes, Sam Graham…(fade out.)

Laundry

Once you've exited into the yard, turn right and immediately go through the door on your right. This is the laundry room. Archaeologists uncovered the dirt floor you're standing over along with more than 10,000 artifacts. These include coins, buttons, ceramics, glass, and marbles; all items used by the Aikens and the enslaved who lived here, some of which are on display.

Look at the wall directly across from you. If you look closely you will notice the lines in the brick showing where the 19th century chimney flues were located. In the middle of the wall is a large area where the bricks are noticeably darker than others. This shows where the fireback for the main fireplace powering the laundry once stood. This fireplace, now collapsed, had many, many fires in its day -- extremely hot ones -- which is why this brick is so eroded. Look down to the left on the ground and you will see circular foundations of brick. This is where the large set-kettle for boiling laundry was placed. A fire would have been lit underneath, and the flue for that smaller fire would have gone diagonally up the wall to join the main chimney. A rainwater cistern located outside the laundry room fed the set kettle. The Aikens installed this system when they renovated in the 1830s. That's a lot of work for clean socks!

In this room, enslaved laundresses spent hours working in hot and unsafe conditions. Before modern times, laundry was a back-breaking ordeal that took several days.

That included sewing, soaking, boiling, scrubbing and ironing. Ironing was done by heating an all-metal iron on the stove with no safety handles or heat controls. Commercial laundry detergent wasn't a thing, so laundresses sometimes made their own soap, another grueling day-long process of cooking animal fat with lye.

Speaking of laundry, Antebellum Charleston's wealthy slaveholders enjoyed the freedom of to select fine clothing, while those who laundered their clothing didn't have much choice of what they themselves could wear.

Policing what people wear is a powerful form of oppression, and the government passed several laws to control enslaved people's clothing. The Slave Act of 1735 explicitly spelled out what kinds of garments were acceptable for the enslaved—and set out punishments for infractions. Enslaved domestic servants had somewhat nicer clothes, to match the slave owner's aesthetic. Sometimes enslaved servants could barter for nice clothes or get hand-me-downs from their white owners, but this was frowned on.

Archaeological evidence suggests that enslaved people supplemented their income by utilizing the laundry room to offer laundry services to those outside the Aiken-Rhett family. Sometimes, slave owners like Governor Aiken hired out their skilled enslaved workers. When hired out away

from the property, they would have worn numbered identification badges – and they would ***not*** want to be caught without one, or they could risk being sent to the workhouse – a place where slaveholders would pay to have their enslaved disciplined with severe punishments. In some cases, though, the hire-out system could offer a path for the enslaved to purchase their freedom. But how can we be sure that the enslaved here worked for anyone but the Aikens? Archaeology, archives, and accidents, of course! In 2015, Archaeologists found a Charleston police button from the 19th century in this room, suggesting they laundered police uniforms here. Then, Lauren Northup, Director of Museums for the Foundation, stumbled upon a letter. Here, let's listen to her tell the story.

Lauren Northup, Director of Museums:

> *The archaeological dig we did in the laundry room in 2015 was a really exciting time-- we were able to uncover so many artifacts and that told of so much more about the lives of the people who lived and worked in these dependency spaces. And for me, the most exciting discovery was not only something that was pulled out of the earth, but also an archival discovery that went right alongside it. And so as the archaeologists were working they were uncovering hundreds of different buttons. And so many buttons that it really would have been impossible for one family to use this many buttons and so the team was looking at them and then sort of decided that it was possible that this laundry facility was not just servicing the Aiken household but likely was being used as kind of a hire-out system before and after the war, and the smoking gun artifact for that was a Charleston police button on which you can see here in the case, which actually dates to slightly after the civil war. And so the same time that they were pulling on these buttons on the ground I was in the archives doing research for a separate project a cultural landscape report where I was combing through about 90 boxes of Aiken family papers at the Charleston museum archives. And I was methodically going through those looking for evidence of landscape, so seed receipts or anything to do with gardening. And it just so happens that in between sort of very disparate pieces of paper was this tiny little hand written notes.*

Let's hear what the note--which is in the case in facsimile--said:

"Mrs. Rhett,
Dear madam, in your closet last week please see can you find 2 pairs of drawers, and one undervest, and one towel that belong to Mrs. Webb. My sister is washing for Mrs. Webb and has been sick for the last 3 weeks and I had her washed. She is well and have her washed this week. Please send them for me and I hope that you as well.
As ever your servant Pauline Brooks. PS. Her name is on her things."

> *And as I read through it was really basically the same week that we've been discussing how many buttons were being uncovered. I realize that I have found in the archives evidence that sure enough the archaeologists were right. And that really never happened for us before so that was pretty exciting, The note was very instructive about this sort of work that was going on in the laundry room and not only that, thankfully, the*

woman who wrote it Pauline Brooks signs her first and last name. So I quickly went to Ancestry.com and looked up Pauline Brooks and did some fast and furious research about who she was. When she arrived in Charleston she moved here from Alabama with her family after the war. And I was able to trace basically her lineage here in Charleston through city directories and census reports, it's possible to see all the different places she lived, and she lived primarily in north central at the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century she was listed as a washer woman in census reports. And her descendants--some of them still live here. And what's really interesting to me is how the story of someone like Pauline Brooks which would have never been recorded in traditional historic sources, through archeology and kind of happenstance archival research, you're able to learn so much about a person's lifetime in a city. One that otherwise you know would have been completely lost.

Stable and Carriage House

Walk toward the carriage house, and turn into the first door on your right, into the stable. Ahead of you, indentations in the wood show where horses cribbed – *chewed* on the wood. To your right in the corner at the back of the stalls, there is a small staircase, and the hatches in the ceiling were for bales of hay. Above you there are two dormitory-style enslaved quarters which, for conservation reasons, we are unable to visit. Enslaved single men and coachmen probably lived there.

Henry Greggs may have lived above these stables. He's listed in census records as the Aiken's coachman from 1877 to 1892, after the Civil War, and probably had the same duty while enslaved. He and his family float in and out of records and – like most formerly enslaved families – their stories are often incomplete. Henry left for a period of time after Emancipation – as did most formerly enslaved people once they were financially able – but he later returned to work as a coach driver. He died at the house in 1908, 43 years after the end of the civil war. This may have been his residence for much of his life.

Ready to go back inside the house? As you heard toward the stairs of the house, let's hear a few thoughts from Bernie Powers, history professor at College of Charleston. I'll wait for you at the bottom of the stairs:

Bernie Powers, History Professor at College of Charleston:

> *If I could ensure that visitors to the Aiken-Rhett property left knowing a single thing, I would want them to know that the majority of the people who lived on this property were enslaved people. They were the majority by far, but unfortunately, as you go around the city, their lives are not really the focal point of stories that are told…*
>
> *It is possible here in the Charleston area to go to a property and essentially take a tour of the white experience and then, if you want you can choose to explore the African-American experience. Lots of times, people choose not to examine that part of life on the property, but the important thing about Historic Charleston at Aiken-Rhett is that that experience is interwoven into the entirety of the property, and you begin with it. There's no way of avoiding the presence of black people, the institution of slavery, and that's very crucial to understanding the lives of the whites who resided there. Also, because most people don't really think about it today, but it is during this time period, the period of enslavement when African-Americans and whites, white Charlestonians and black Charlestonians lived in greater proximity to one another than they ever have since then. In that sense, their lives, their sensibilities, the way in which they interacted, reinforced and shaped one another as people. We need to understand that, and the way that the tours are set up there allow us to really think about that kind of cross-racial, interracial interaction in some profound ways, if we take the time to do it.*

Back Staircase + Entry Hall

Before you walk up the stairs, notice the two boot-scrapes on the bottom of the steps. Walk into the house and I'll meet you at the top of the stairs. This entrance would used by the Aiken family. When you enter, make sure to look to the right of the staircase to see a marble bust of Governor Aiken's cousin, Ellen Martin Aiken.

Take a right into the main entry hall, a grand Greek Revival entrance, where an enslaved butler would have ushered guests into the house.

This entrance announced the Aiken's social status. The staircase, with its expensive marble, was part of the 1830's renovation Governor Aiken and his wife Harriet undertook to make their home look like a classical mansion, a popular design at the time.

In the 1980's, before the Foundation acquired the Aiken Rhett House, the entry hall was restored with faux marble decorations. Recent paint analysis revealed that what you see before you is nothing like the warm cream and tan colors that the Aikens had here.

Let's take a moment to talk about the difference between restoring and preserving.

Restoration tries to replicate something's original state, while preservation focuses on preserving something the way it was found. Preservation requires a lot of careful discussion and decision making. The Foundation purchased this house in 1995 with the mission to *preserve* it as found and since then have been working with teams of specialists to stabilize the 200-year ~~old~~ structure. So while some parts of the house might look like they are falling apart – don't worry! Every bit of peeling wallpaper or crumbling plaster is being monitored and cared for.

Where this entry hall is concerned, this mission presents an *interesting conundrum.* If the Foundation had chosen to restore this house to its mid-19th century appearance, this would have removed the faux marble and restored the color scheme.. But since the Foundation's mission is to preserve this property as found… does that mean the 1980s marble and its colors should stay? Are the 1980s just as important to preserve as the 1830s? What do you think? What would someone 200 years in the future think? In 200 years, will children study David Bowie with the same reverence as they do Chopin? Let's hope so.

Continue into the double parlors, the hub of many festivities the Aikens hosted.

Double Parlor, Part 1

As you enter, look to your right, on the side of the fireplace. You can see the remnants of a knob that the Aikens could have used to call for enslaved servants to bring refreshments for their guests. These were all connected to the call bell system you saw outside. Keep an eye out for them throughout the house – they are usually on the sides of fireplaces.

Enslaved servants would have taken care of the guests' every need, maybe overhearing snippets of Governor Aiken's conversations about politics, possibly even murmurings of *secession* and war. Notice the double doors, called pocket doors. They could be closed to create two separate rooms or opened to become one big entertainment space, depending whether the Aikens were having an intimate gathering or a lavish soiree.

Stay in this first room for now. Facing the door where you entered, check out the panels with wallpaper on the right. The Aikens installed the imported French wallpaper in the late 1850s. Although it's faded with time, once it would've dazzled guests with bright pink, blue, green, and gold. Notice the French crystal chandeliers and imagine them glittering in candlelight, flickering across the faces of the ladies at the party.

A bust of Proserpina sits in the corner, a souvenir from Harriet Lowndes Aikens' second Grand Tour of Europe. Harriet Aiken commissioned this copy of a bust of Persephone directly from the American sculptor Hiram Powers when she was in Florence in 1857. This is one of his best known works and copies of it are also in the collections of museums like the Milwaukee Art Museum and the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

The Aikens were at the pinnacle of Charleston society both socially and politically, and they certainly knew how to throw a party According to one guest in 1850, Swedish author Frederika Bremer:

"*There was very beautiful music; and for the rest, conversation in the room, or out under the piazzas… Five hundred persons, it is said, were invited, and the entertainment was one of the most beautiful I have been present at in this country.*"

The photograph on a stand to the left of the pocket door shows the room in 1918. Not long after, it fell out of regular use. Maintaining a house like this required a lot of money and labor, so the family slowly closed off different rooms as the years went on. So some of the rooms are like time capsules, allowing us to witness layers (upon layers) of the past.

Let's walk through the pocket doors to meet Harriet Aiken.

Double Parlor, Part 2

Harriet Lowndes Aiken and her daughter Henrietta Aiken Rhett spent many hours in this room entertaining and playing music. How far can you trace your family's history? Ellis Island? The founding of America? Harriet's family history can be traced back to the Norman Conquest in 1066!

The painting above the piano has faded, but once depicted a pastoral scene of Lake Como in Italy and may have reminded Harriet of her family's time there. She was well-traveled, spoke several languages, and could play a number of instruments, including the harp and the piano. Harriet sold one of her rings to buy the piano in this room for her daughter Henrietta after the Civil War.

The music on the piano is called "Souvenir de Charleston" and you're actually hearing it right now! It was written for Henrietta by Marie Siegling, a Charleston-born composer and singer who rubbed shoulders with the likes of German composers Wagner and Schumann.

Henrietta Aiken Rhett grew up in this house and raised her five children here. On the panel on the wall across from the piano, you can see pictures of her and her husband, Andrew Burnett Rhett, who served as a major in the Confederate Army. They married during the Civil War at the Aiken's summer house in Flat Rock, North Carolina, even though Andrew Burnett was a secessionist and Governor Aiken was opposed to secession. Perhaps they had the no-politics-at-the-dinner-table-rule down to a science.

By the way, the blue-grey color of the walls is leftover from the filming of Wes Craven's cult classic "Swamp Thing" in the 1980's. Adding injury to insult, Hurricane Hugo badly damaged this room in 1989. While the Foundation has left the room as they found it, you can look at the iPad to see a render of what it looked like in mint condition with pink walls!

Sometimes a big party calls for a big breath of fresh air. Head outside onto the piazza. That's what Charlestonians call a porch or a veranda.

Piazza

Piazzas are a staple of Charleston living because they provide both outdoor living space and cross-ventilation, catching sea breezes to provide a sort of old-school climate-control for the house. In a time before central air, a house's architecture was used to funnel breezes through the building, and high ceilings pulled heat away from human-level.

Most of the Aiken Rhett house still isn't climate controlled. When you were inside the parlour, did it feel cooler? Did you detect a breeze? Rooms in the main house were built to be as comfortable and airy as possible. As you move through the house, take note of subtle temperature changes from room to room.

The Aikens' and their guests used these piazzas to entertain, to relax, and…to joggle! You're probably wondering about the long curved bench in front of you. It is called a "joggling board," and it's as Charlestonian as the piazza itself. No one knows for sure how they came about. One theory says that these were used as courting benches: the legend goes that if you had a joggling board on your porch – er, piazza – you'd never have an unmarried daughter. The man and woman would sit on opposite sides of the bench, and "joggle" themselves to the center. They could finally share a moment, a conversation, or maybe even a kiss after a long night of throwing flirtatious glances at each other. Joggling boards lost popularity after WWII, but recently they've made a comeback, with several companies in Charleston offering custom joggling boards for purchase.

If you look back toward the house, you'll see a sculptural niche that marks the original entrance before the 1830's renovations.

Continue around the corner. I'll wait for a few seconds. (pause for five seconds) Once you turn the corner, behind the other joggling board on your left, you'll see a part of the original exterior. There's a staircase on your right that leads down to a small formal garden with a meandering path. You're welcome to have a look. Perhaps you'd like to explore the hidden archways and benches with the attractive person you met on the joggling board, or hey – maybe you're just into horticulture. When you're done, continue into the dining room on your left.

Dining Room

We hope you're feeling famished and fabulous, because this dining room – another gem from the 1830's renovation – hosted grand dinner parties. In case you need to know what Governor Aiken looked like, you're in luck: you can gaze upon his portrait on the wall to your right!

Okay – back to the dinner parties! Dinner was a very long and elaborate, fancy affair in the antebellum south. People in Charleston didn't just throw any old dinner party. Imagine this room filled with twenty of the Aikens' closest friends: chandeliers lit, silverware clinking, and appetizing aromas wafting in. One menu at a dinner in this era included: Calf's head soup, vegetables, broiled bass and fried whiting, saddle of mutton, ham, roast turkey, oysters, ice cream, fruits and more.

Harriet Lowndes would have supervised the menu. But the actual cooking and preparation was done by enslaved domestic servants, perhaps like Ann Greggs. She may have prepared many legendary feasts for the Aikens.

Enslaved footmen in livery served guests. They'd work all day to prepare the place settings, making sure the first course was ready on the table by the time guests arrived, and resetting the linens and silverware between each course. Henry Greggs and Charles Richardson, then young adults, may have worked in here as butlers. Using the staircase you saw on the group flood, they carried tray after tray of food from the servant's hall you visited earlier.

After dinner, ladies withdrew to the parlor while the gentlemen stayed and chatted in the dining room.

Take a look at the porcelain displayed in the corner of the room close to you. Dinner settings during the 19th century became incredibly extravagant, with dishes and utensils created for very specific purposes: multiple forks, special sugar tongs, ice cream dishes… don't even *try* to guess how many types of salad plates there were. As mass manufacturing made matching dish sets available to more and more people, the dinner settings of the elite grew more expansive.

Though many of the rooms in the house were closed off, the family continued to use the . Perhaps in later years, they pared down to just two forks instead of five.

Take your time in here, and when you're done, exit out of the left doorway and make your way into the library.

Library

Like many wealthy families of their day, , the Aikens had their very own library. Books and literacy, along with luxurious travels, were a marker of the upper class and the Aikens spent large amounts of money and time amassing a collection of over 2,000 books. They were fluent in several languages and very well traveled – and their book collection reflects that. The Aikens filled their shelves with books on topics ranging from religion to history to travel.

With so many books, the Aikens used the large table to lay out the different texts they were reading, the way you might have several tabs open on your web browser.

Take a look out the window to the work yard. The Aiken family spent many hours in this room reading. For those in the yard, however, this was a highly illegal act. South Carolina's slave code prohibited enslaved Africans from learning to read and write. Slaveholders feared that literacy would lead to greater resistance, making the enslaved better equipped to organize or revolt. It's no great secret that knowledge is power.

Despite these constraints, many enslaved people did learn to read and write, including some of those who lived here, like Dorcas Richardson. Some enslaved people ignored the law, and attended illegal schools in Charleston. Others were taught by slave holders – either to become more efficient workers or to read the Bible.

Elijah Green, a formerly enslaved man in Charleston, said that being caught with a pencil and paper was treated as a crime as serious as murdering a slave holder. Elijah said:

"*...for God's sake, don't let a slave be catch with pencil and paper. That was a major crime. You might as well had killed your marster or missus.*"

The library is only a few physical feet away from the enslaved spaces, but the legal, moral, and political gap between them was enormous.

The engraved portraits on the wall include three of the leading statesmen of Governor Aiken's day: John C. Calhoun (of South Carolina), Daniel Webster (of New Hampshire) and Henry Clay (of Kentucky). This "Great Triumvirate," as they were called, led the charge of the debate in the mid 1800's over states rights', slavery, and United States expansion. Governor Aiken was state a representative, state senator, Governor of South Carolina, and a member of the US House of Representatives.

The United States government bombarded the lower part of Charleston for 587 days during the Civil War – and the Aiken Rhett House narrowly avoided the damage by being located just outside of the effective gun range. In fact, during the siege, the Confederate commander Brigadier General P.G.T. Beauregard moved his headquarters into this house to wait out the attack. When Charleston was occupied in 1865, Union troops looted the house.

While Governor Aiken was opposed to secession, he supported the Confederacy financially. In the end, neither side seemed to trust him. He was even imprisoned twice during the Civil War – once by the Confederacy, and once by the United States government.

When you're ready please walk through the doorway to the main stair hall. Go up the stairs to your left to the second floor landing. Turn right and go into the dressing room.

Dressing Room and Bedchamber

This room was used for dressing and bathing, with a low ceiling to retain heat during Charleston's short but chilly winters. Enslaved domestic servants would have brought in piles of carefully folded clothing from the laundry and stored them in the large armoire to your right.

The chamber pot here was a much more convenient option than trekking all the way to the privy. Flushing toilets were added to the house later on, but before that, they relied on enslaved servants to dispose of waste.

Go through the door and into the bedchamber.

Imagine this room over a century and a half ago – the circular imprint on the ceiling above the bed is from a corona which held up a luxurious canopy, with ornate drapes in colder weather replaced by mosquito netting in warmer weather. In 1850, there were 36,000 reported cases of Dengue Fever in Charleston, so those mosquito nets were definitely not just for decoration.

Check out the straw mat on the floor. The Aikens had a huge collection of straw mats imported from Asia.

Spring might mean flowers for some, but for servants and enslaved people here, it was time to begin the lengthy process of replacing wool carpeting with straw matting—which is cooler and less susceptible to insect infestation. If you look closely at the floorboards, you can see the track holes used to secure the carpets and mats.

The Charleston social season was during the cooler months of January to May, a period when wealthy planters occupied their townhouses and enjoyed dinners, balls, and soirees. The Aikens also had a summer residence in Flat Rock, North Carolina and a house on their plantation, Jehossee. Enslaved workers travelled days ahead of them to prepare each residence for their arrival.

Speaking of traveling, let's take a look at the stairhall and piazza. Go through the door back into the hallway.

Stairhall

How's the temperature today? Hallways like this were part of the house's cooling system. This hallway was comfortably furnished and well-lit for that very reason.

Hanging on the walls are three eras of lighting technology: oil, gas, and electric. 1dt oil: The original oil-burning chandelier hangs in the center. 2, gas: The two sconces on either side of the arch were installed later when the house was converted to gas. 3, electricity, if you're facing the back stairs, the sconce on the right was adapted one more time when it was wired for electricity in the early twentieth century.

Like layers of peeling wallpaper, the lights show what it means to preserve a structure as found rather than restoring it to a single time period, reminding us that history is happening all the time – even now!

Exit onto the piazza. Turn right and walk to the end. In front of you, you can see remnants of the neighborhood that the Aikens knew, including Wragg Mall – named for the original planners of this neighborhood. This suburb was not just for planters and merchants with elegant villas and townhouses. Eleven of the houses around here were home to "free persons of color" as well as enslaved people. Sometimes enslaved people in Charleston could negotiate living away from their owners.

Look at the two brick houses on the right side of the mall across Elizabeth Street from the Aiken-Rhett House. These are the only surviving portion of Aiken's Row, a group of seven of the fifty-nine houses that the Governor owned as rental properties in 1861. Enjoy the view, and when you're ready, head back inside and into the door on your right.

Second Bedchamber and Dressing Room

You'll see a sleigh bed – popular in the mid-1800s and maybe similar to one that Harriet Lowndes would have used. Harriet had two children: Henrietta in 1836 and Thomas in 1841. Perhaps she gave birth in this very room. Though the Aikens were wealthy, they were not immune to tragedy – Thomas died in infancy.

Henrietta Aiken-Rhett grew up in this house and lived here after she was married to Andrew Burnett Rhett. Andrew died in 1879, leaving Henrietta to raise her five children here: William Aiken, Edmund, Harriet, I'on, and Andrew.

There are two portraits on the wall. On the right is their second youngest. I'on, Rhett born in 1876. He worked as a realtor and served on the Charleston City Council. On the left is Andrew, Junior, the youngest, who became the superintendent of Charleston public schools. After Henrietta died in 1918, the house was divided between her children.

But what did they do in their spare time? In an interview, a family member said that these two brothers loved to fight chicks – that they raised game chickens, and even had their own special breed of chicken called the "Rhett Morgan."

I'on bought out their heirs and lived here with his wife, Francis Hinson Dill Rhett. Henrietta's grandchildren and other members of the family often came to the house for visits and parties, and one could even recall a man living above the carriage house who cared for the horses---could it have been Henry Greggs?

I'on died in 1959, leaving Francis as the owner of the house. Neighbors remembered a black Sedan belonging to Francis, parked in what's now the carriage house. Domestic servants lived in the outbuildings even until this time--like Mary Middleton, an African American nurse who was Francis Dill Rhett's caretaker. Francis eventually became ill and moved in with her sister. As the rooms were closed off and parts of the house unused, there were multiple break-ins, and many items were stolen from the house.. (Francis donated this house to the Charleston Museum in 1975.)

When you're ready, walk forward into the adjacent dressing room.

Francis, like many women at the time, played cards, probably bridge, and she did it right here. That may seem odd, but in an old house that wasn't completely heated, this had a gas hearter and a fireplace, making it an ideal spot to have a card game during the winter: the toastiest room available. Did she know, though, that she was following in the footsteps of those that had lived her before her?

Because in antebellum Charleston, bedchambers and dressing rooms weren't the private spaces we consider them today. The lady of the house instructed her enslaved servants on the

day's tasks, sewed with her daughters, and had friends over, even while getting dressed for the day.

The footbath and tub had been used to bathe, and the marble basin is a 20th century addition. Before indoor plumbing, water was heated by a fire and an enslaved person would have brought bucket after bucket, to fill the tub. Remember—an average five-gallon bucket of water weighs about forty pounds, so carrying that scalding water back and forth multiple times must have been a dangerous and uncomfortable task.

To your left, there's a dressing table. In the 1800's, these were decorated in drapes of clean white dimity or muslin. Add an open flame to the mix and you have the potential for disaster. At Henrietta and Andrew Burnett's wedding in 1862 in Flatrock, North Carolina, a dressing table like this one was the source of a major problem. Mary Boykin Chesnut, a guest, 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 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."

Drawing Room

When you're ready, walk into the drawing room. Like the double parlors downstairs, this was a site of revelry and balls before the Civil War. Everything about it is ornate, especially the gold, silver, and red flocked wall paper. The Aikens added the wallpaper in 1858, when they returned from a Grand Tour, probably trying to make it more of a formal room.

Charleston society looked to Europe as the height of taste and elegance. This wallpaper was a clear message that even though Governor Aiken was a relative newcomer to Charleston's social scene, he was very well placed. One party guest, named Francis Middleton recalled: *"Last night I was at the handsomest ball I have ever seen… the two floors were entirely thrown open—the orchestra from the theatre played for the dancers – and the supper table was covered with a rick service of silver – lights in profusion, and a crowded, handsomely dressed assembly."*

For the Aikens' grandest entertainments, visitors enjoyed different festivities in different areas of the house, wandering upstairs, downstairs, and all over.

After Governor Aiken died, Harriet made this room into her bedroom. If you look at the ceiling in the far corner of the room, you'll see the shadow mark of a corona, which is where her bed would have been. After she died in 1892, the room was closed and mostly untouched until the 1970's.

This is one of the rooms badly damaged by Hurricane Hugo in 1989. In case you're keeping score at home, this house has survived war, occupation, earthquakes, break-ins, and hurricanes.

Look closely at the walls and you'll notice traces of the original wallpaper in this room. Wallpaper was expensive in the early 19th century and out of reach for all but the most well-to-do and often resembled even more expensive wallcoverings – like tapestries. As the industrial revolution progressed, new printing methods and more colorfast dyes made wallpaper more colorful, elaborate, and popular than ever. In the 1830's the wallpaper in this room was the height of fashion.

Throughout the house, there are fragments of surviving wallpaper. Wallpaper is rarely preserved in historic houses as it doesn't age well. For one thing, the dyes fade and acid eats away at the paper. It's also usually stuck to the walls with paste made of flour and water--which is an especially tasty snack for bugs. That can't be good. Often, multiple layers are put down on one surface over time, and sometimes it's even covered in paint – there are examples of both in the house.

It's a challenge to preserve in a setting where there's no climate control! The small squares of clear plastic you see tacked over sections of loose wallpaper is called 'Mylar' and it's there to protect what remains. Constant changes in temperature and humidity aren't kind to paper and

plaster! Between that and Hurricane Hugo—which knocked down two chimneys and caused massive water damage—it's a miracle that any wallpaper survives at all!

When you are finished viewing the drawing room, exit and turn right. Descend the staircase to the first floor. The staircase you are now using was added during the 1850s renovation. It was initially thought to have been used primarily by enslaved people to service the house, but further studies have suggested that it was a shared space, You'll see a dry sink on your left as you descend.

When you reach the first floor landing, follow signs for the art gallery, which you'll find on your right once you've returned to the grand entrance hall.

Art Gallery

The last stop on this tour is the Aiken Family Art Gallery. The art gallery is one of the only known galleries of its kind in the southeast with its collection intact, and is one of the only rooms in the main house that is kept climate controlled. Take a moment and enjoy it!

This gallery was the centerpiece of their 1857 renovation, and they built it to display their collection of sculptures, paintings, and portraits. They collected much of it during a year-long Grand Tour. It was a major undertaking: Harriet Lowndes's travel diary noted that the family entered Paris with a "ridiculous quantity of trunks in tow." and that was nowhere near the last stop on their tour!

While abroad, the Aikens visited historic sites, museums and galleries in London, Paris, Vienna, Prague, Venice, Naples, Rome, and more. They were fans of European masterpieces and collected both copies and originals. There are copies of works attributed to Andrea del Sarto, Raphael, and Canova in their collection.

George Whiting Flagg, a popular American painter, painted this life-sized portrait of Harriet Lowndes. Harriet was 45 in 1858 when this was painted. A heavy velvet curtain sometimes covered this painting… in case she was feeling shy. They also displayed more contemporary artists, like Hiram Powers, whose Persephone bust we saw in the double drawing room.

The family used this space even in the 20th century, and I'on and Francis Dill Rhett gave a Christmas party here every year for their extended family.

Enjoy a stroll around the gallery, and thanks for listening to this tour! We've seen a lot – including some of the best preserved slave quarters in a city that was once home to more enslaved people than free people of any color. We've also seen some of the positives and perils of attempting to preserve a property as found. This entire property, from the dark and cramped enslaved quarters to the electric light fixtures to the breezy piazzas, speaks to the fact that history doesn't happen in a vacuum. Events, ideas, and people from close by and far away are speaking to us from the floorboards, the hearthstones, the original paint, and what remains of the 200-year-old wallpaper. Thank you for joining us and witnessing these stories. Understanding the past is the best way we can positively impact the future!

Take a right out of the room and down the stairs. If you're using your own device, feel free to stay a while, or you can head out the door. If you borrowed a device, please head downstairs to the gift shop to return it.

We hope you enjoyed exploring the Aiken-Rhett House with Historic Charleston Foundation. If you want another trip into Charleston's past, be sure to check out our audio tour at the Nathaniel Russell House, or our preservation walking tour of the city!