



Refined Proportions, 1820

Built in 1820 for Charleston merchant John Robinson and his wife Susan, the Aiken-Rhett House was constructed as a typical Charleston double house containing a central hallway with two rooms on either side.

The main entrance was located on Judith Street and guests ascended the stairs to the piazza and entered into the hallway. The late Federal style house featured a balanced and symmetrical design and a two-story piazza above a brick arcade. The Flemish bond brickwork and white lime mortar joints were given a monochromatic appearance by a thin coating of a red paint.

Also part of the property were two support buildings at the rear of the main house. They included a kitchen, slave quarters, stables and a carriage house.

After only five years of ownership, Robinson sold the property to meet financial obligations after he lost the cargo of at least two ships at sea.



The Grand Villa, 1835

For William Aiken, Sr., the acquisition of Robinson's grand house on the corner of Judith and Elizabeth streets in 1827 was an investment and not an opportunity for a change of residence. When Aiken died unexpectedly in a carriage accident, his vast property was divided between his widow Henrietta Wyatt Aiken and their only child William Aiken, Jr.

Now in sole possession of a large brick house on a prominent site in Wraggborough, William Aiken, Jr. and his wife Harriet Lowndes Aiken transformed the residence into a grand Greek Revival style mansion. Three main changes to the property took place in the early 1830s: the Aikens moved the front entrance to Elizabeth Street, reconfigured the first floor and made a large addition to the eastern portion of the house.

In order to bring unity to this greatly expanded complex, the Aikens covered the additions as well as the original structure with stucco and coated it with a yellow ochre lime wash. As a finishing touch, masons scored the stucco to imitate stone masonry, adding white lines in the scoring to simulate mortar joints.



Artistic Expansion, 1858

In August 1857 Governor Aiken, Mrs. Aiken and their daughter Henrietta departed by steamer for New York on the first leg of the European Grand tour. Their acquisition of art and sculpture on this trip is significant, for it coincides with a new addition to their house. The construction of a new gallery wing on the northwest corner of the house began while the family was overseas.

Located adjacent to the elaborate west entrance, the art gallery provided a room in which to display the latest European art and sculpture. Along with this addition, Governor and Mrs. Aiken raised the main house and the east wing to three stories, adding new dressing rooms and bedchambers.

Although Aiken-Rhett descendants and family members continued to reside in the house until the 1970s, they made minimal alterations to the property during their occupation. As a result, the Aiken-Rhett house serves as a time capsule virtually unaltered since the 19th century.











