



PRESERVATION SOCIETY *of* CHARLESTON

—FOUNDED 1920—

**20 Charlotte Street
Joseph Aiken House
c. 1848
Residence of Wil Sligh
Guides: 6**

Revised 2011 AK

House History

Built in 1848 by Robert Martin, the structure features two stories of gracious rooms with lofty ceilings and includes a central hall with a circular staircase. The exterior and interior of the structure embrace the Greek Revival style, with a full-height portico, full-length doors and windows, egg-and-dart and waterleaf door trim, thumb-mold marble window lintels and dentil cornice work. The anthemion pattern and Greek fret are repeated in the cast-iron balconies and original front gate. Additionally, the capitals of the four front columns display a variation of the “Tower of the Winds” design with acanthus and lotus leaves, which are now missing. The bare, broad-surfaced approach of the Greek Revival style is evident in the unadorned marble mantels and the limited decoration of the plaster cornice and high baseboards. The west façade, however, displays a break from the Greek Revival style with an arcaded loggia that contains Italianate elements.

This two-story brick structure was constructed by Robert Martin circa 1848 as a wedding gift for his daughter, Ellen Daniel Martin, on the occasion of her marriage to her second cousin Joseph Aiken. Joseph, cousin of Governor William Aiken, and Ellen had six children, all born in this house. Aiken, a planter and prominent lawyer in Charleston and later a financial agent for Governor William Aiken, was also interested in architecture. Aiken oversaw the design of the private art gallery for his cousin at 48 Elizabeth Street in 1857-58. In addition, Aiken was an accomplished artist, and used this house as a showplace for his work. A nineteenth-century description of the house states that Aiken filled his house with “works from his own hand.” These works included oil paintings of wildlife and landscapes and sculptures of his wife and daughters. The house passed out of the Aiken family in 1889.

By the 1970s, the house had been chopped into a number of one-room apartments. Owners in the 1980s and 1990s performed extensive restorations to the house to return it to a single family residence. The current owner purchased the property in 2002.

FIRST FLOOR EAST SIDE

The east side first floor consists of a drawing room, dining room, pantry, kitchen, and a service staircase to the rear.

An unusual feature is the elaborate pediment over the double doors leading from parlor to dining room which repeats a modified anthemion (honeysuckle ornament) pattern which may be considered Egyptian in expression.

FIRST FLOOR WEST SIDE

The west side consists of two large chambers, one of which may originally have been a library, and a connecting recessed Italian loggia, an open porch overlooking the formal garden.

First Floor

This floor has a drawing room, dining room, pantry, kitchen and service staircase. On the West side are two large chambers a library and a connecting loggia open porch overlooking the gardens on both floors. Notice the molded plaster medallions and the high floor boards and plaster walls. The black marble mantels, unadorned by carving, are purposely plain to show off the mirrors and chandeliers. The pocket doors, dividing the rooms are about five hundred pounds. The casters and weight make the doors easy to glide.

Parlor – Where guests would wait and be greeted.

- Crystal and gilt-metal chandelier with twenty-five lights and teardrop prisms.
- Mid 19th century Mahogany Secretary.
- Baker Table.
- Oil on canvas that dates to 1825.
- Beside the yellow chair is an inlaid mahogany Pembroke table, mid-19th century. This table has a rectangular top with half-circle shape drop leaves drawer on tapered legs.
- American 19th century portrait entitled “Portrait of Gentle Man”, framed and unsigned.

Drawing Room – This room was also called the Withdrawing room. Guests would separate in this room after dinner. The gentlemen would inhabit the drawing room for conversation, drinking and smoking. The doors would be closed as the women would stay at the table in the dining area or retire to the bedroom for tea and dessert.

- A Bush and Gerts concert grand piano.
- Ornate Chippendale gold leaf mirror with heavy Oriental influences. Notice the top pediment flanked by matching swans, all hand carved and gold leaf finish.
- Empire sofa, c. 1830.
- Portrait, woman, oil and canvas, c. 1830.

Dining Area

- The woodwork and molding are plain, except for the archway decoration in the hall and the Egyptian Revival shaped surround and Greek Revival detail over the pocket doors, with the same honeysuckle design.

- Oil and canvas painting entitled “Madonna and Child”. Painted by Bartolome Esteban Murillo, a Spanish painter, (1616-1682).
- Regency style inlaid Mahogany occasional table. It has an oval form with scalloped brags gallery, fluted frieze and tapered legs with ankle collars.
- Wall scones are gilt metal and crystal, five light, tiered and scrolling forms, supported by three C shaped arms.

Stairway

- Crystal and Gilt-metal, Murano glass chandelier with leaf decoration.
- Bathrooms on both floors were converted from the dressing rooms.
- Coming up to the second floor you will see a double door topped by a fan light. This is a false double door (only one side opens). On the other side, there is a wall and a single door complete with molding.
- A balcony overlooking the garden has the repeated honeysuckle patterns on the grillwork.

Bedroom Sitting Area

- This picture was painted by Charles Haslewood Shannon, a British painter, in the late 1800’s. It is titled “Mother”.
- Italian 20th century frieze.
- Sterling relief plaque framed and marked 925 (indicating that it is real silver). It took approximately 34.5 grams of silver to make this piece.

Gardens

- There is a brick walled fence in the rear.
- The formal gardens of the Aiken house are attributed to Briggs and have been refurbished by the owners.
- The L-shaped carriage house was originally the horse stables and slave quarters and house servants would have also stayed in the basement.
- There a brick quoins on the northwestern corner only.

Dennis, Lisa. "Greek-Revival Mansion Was Built as Nuptial Gift, Adorned with Art." The News & Courier 8 Oct. 1984.