

Ephemeral Flooring in Victorian America: Grass Mats at the Aiken-Rhett House

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The Aiken-Rhett House in Charleston, South Carolina is one of two house museums run by Historic Charleston Foundation (HCF). The home is interpreted to represent the period of ownership of William Aiken, Jr., but it follows a policy of preservation to stabilize further deterioration that physically maintains the property much as it was when the house was purchased from the Charleston Museum by HCF in 1995.

William Aiken, Jr. was the governor of South Carolina, 1844-1846. He served in the state legislature, and he was a South Carolina Representative in the U.S. House of Representatives, 1851-1857. In addition to this home, he also owned the large Jehossee Plantation on Jehossee Island and other property throughout North and South Carolina. The house was originally built and owned by merchant John Robinson in 1817. In 1827 William Aiken, Sr., Aiken's father, purchased the house after Robinson was forced to sell it. Aiken then inherited the house from his father in 1831 when he passed away. In 1833 Aiken and his wife Harriet Lowndes made this house their primary residence. They undertook major renovations when they moved in and again in the 1850s. This period between 1831 and 1860 is what will be examined further in this study.¹

At the Aiken-Rhett House, there is an exquisite collection of grass floor matting purchased by William Aiken, Jr. and his family. The household used these grass mats as both area and full-floor coverings during the summer months. Grass matting was common throughout homes in late eighteenth and nineteenth century America. It was so ubiquitous that men as synonymous with America herself as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson owned and discussed grass mats respectively. Washington used grass mats in Mount Vernon, purchasing matting both before and after the American Revolution. Jefferson even debated putting grass

¹ Historic Charleston Foundation, "History of the Aiken-Rhett House," <http://www.historiccharleston.org/experience/arh/history.html>, (accessed 4 April 2010).

mats in the White House, but he decided against it because of their rapid deterioration.² Few nineteenth century grass mats exist today which makes the collection at Aiken-Rhett even more remarkable.

Grass matting is naturally ephemeral; the fact that few examples remain says much less about the status and quality of grass matting than it does about the general durability of woven grass under constant foot traffic. In America, it was often used only as seasonal flooring. Even with seasonal use, the grass mats did not last long and would need to be replaced often.

Unfortunately, their commonplace nature meant that they were rarely afforded the respect that they deserved. Grass mats were some of the cheapest flooring options in the nineteenth century. Where other textiles may have been preserved, such as Oriental rugs hung on walls as decorations, grass mats would have been used as they were intended, then simply discarded or rolled up and put into storage.³

Throughout the Victorian Era, grass floor matting was popular. Grass matting emerged as a common floor covering in America by the eighteenth century, and the Victorian Era saw a commitment to decorating with grass mats.⁴ Newspaper advertisements confirm that in Charleston during this period, mats were coming from China and India. There are also examples of Japanese grass mats in nineteenth century homes, but the United States did not have an open trade relationship with Japan until after 1854 when Commodore Matthew Perry secured an open

² In the 1760s George Washington purchased Canton matting through a London agent. When China and the United States began a direct trade relationship in the 1780s, he began using a Philadelphia agent to purchase matting. Gail Caskey Winkler & Roger W. Moss, *Victorian Interior Decoration: American Interiors 1830-1900* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1986), 30.

Thomas Jefferson rejected the idea of putting grass mats in the White House because they attracted vermin, were easily soiled by grease, and were prone to wear. Anthony N. Landreau, *America Underfoot: A History of Floor Coverings from Colonial Times to the Present* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1976), 4.

³ As Carl Crossman puts it, "one can reasonably assume that as soon as the carpeting wore out, it was immediately and completely replaced." Carl L. Crossman, *The Decorative Arts of the China Trade: Paintings, Furnishings and Exotic Curiosities* (Suffolk: Antique Collectors Club, 1991), 370.

⁴ Winkler, *Victorian Interior Decoration: American Interiors 1830-1900*.

relationship through the Kanagawa Treaty.⁵ For the majority of the time that the Aiken family was furnishing and decorating their home, Japan was in one of its many phases of isolation from trade and cultural exchange. Although it would be possible for Japanese mats to make it into America through trade with China or the Netherlands, no advertisements appear in Charleston newspapers for Japanese matting, so it seems unlikely that the Aiken-Rhett mats are Japanese. Advertisements for both Chinese and Indian mats are common throughout the nineteenth century, the period in which the Aiken family owned and decorated this home.

Advertisements for matting in Charleston's *South-Carolina Gazette and General Advertiser* appear as early as July 1784.⁶ In the *South Carolina and American General Gazette*, a Columbia, South Carolina paper, an advertisement for matting appears in 1766.⁷ In this early Columbia advertisement matting is listed after haircloth, so it is possible that this matting is not meant for floors nor made of woven grass, but the Charleston advertisement lists matting with oilcloth, which makes it likely that it is in fact floor matting. It is not until 1812 that any Charleston advertisements list matting from India.⁸ In 1818 there is an advertisement for China matting, and the following year, an advertisement describing mats in stock as Canton appears.⁹ Some advertisements for Barcelona and Valencia matting can also be found in Charleston papers, but these did not necessarily come from Spain. Spanish was a term used to reflect a type

⁵ Further discussion of Commodore Perry, the Kanagawa Treaty, and Japanese-American relations can be found in *Narrative of the expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan*: Matthew C. Perry, *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan*, compiled by Francis L. Hawks (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1856).

⁶ "Advertisements," *South-Carolina Gazette and General Advertiser* (Charleston, SC), 15 July 1784, NewsBank, via Richland County Public Library (accessed 15 April 2010).

⁷ "Reeves & Cochran," *The South Carolina and American General Gazette* (Columbia, SC), 26 September 1766, Accessible Archives, via University of South Carolina (accessed 21 April 2010).

⁸ "Advertisements," *City Gazette and Daily Advertiser* (Charleston, SC), 8 September 1812, NewsBank, via Richland County Public Library (accessed 15 April 2010).

⁹ Regarding China matting, "Advertisements," *City Gazette* (Charleston, SC), 8 December 1818, NewsBank, via Richland County Public Library (accessed 15 April 2010). Regarding Canton matting, "Advertisements," *City Gazette* (Charleston, SC), 14 May 1819, NewsBank, via Richland County Public Library (accessed 15 April 2010).

of material, so it is likely that Barcelona and Valencia also described the type of grass used instead of the place of manufacture.¹⁰

Grass matting described as Indian, Chinese, or Cantonese would have been used as regular floor coverings. Coir, or coconut husk, mats were also advertised in Charleston, but these would have been used in entry ways. They were coarser and less intricately patterned: good for wiping ones feet but not for full floor coverings.¹¹ Grass matting could also be used as padding underneath carpeting, but all of the Aiken-Rhett mats were patterned which makes it unlikely that the Aikens used them in this way.



Figure 1

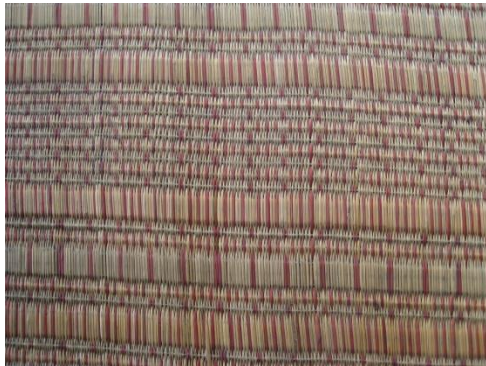


Figure 2

The Aiken family's grass matting comes in a variety of patterns. The majority is striped, but there are plain, checkered, and more intricate mats. The most intricate is bordered with a red pattern and features a faded bluish medallion, *Figure 1*.¹² Many of the mats

have duplicated patterns, implying that these were tacked together to form a full floor covering instead of used as area mats. The most common colors advertised in Charleston newspapers are

¹⁰ Anthony N. Landreau, *America Underfoot: A History of Floor Coverings from Colonial Times to the Present* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1976), 3. "Advertisements," *Southern Patriot* (Charleston, SC), 9 May 1842, NewsBank, via Richland County Public Library (accessed 15 April 2010). "Advertisements," *City Gazette* (Charleston, SC), 11 February 1820, Newsbank, via Richland County Public Library (accessed 15 April 2010). Although the advertisement for Valencia mats reference returning from Gibraltar, it is uncertain whether the mats were made in this region or just traded in Spain and North Africa.

¹¹ Winkler, *Victorian Interior Decoration: American Interiors 1830-1900*, 29.

¹² The center designs of rugs or mats. The bluish color has green undertones and may have initially been blue or green.

red and white. Only two of the Aiken-Rhett mats are primarily red, possibly indicating that they picked less common, more expensive designs.

Identifying dyes is probably the only way, save scientific testing on the grasses used to make these mats, that the place of origin can be determined. Since the only colors listed in advertisements are red, yellow, and white, it is impossible to determine where less common



Figure 3

colors coming into Charleston at the time came from.

The first advertisement to mention color does not appear in a Charleston paper until



Figure 4

1836. The advertisement lists “red and white plaided India matting” in 4x4 pieces.¹³ In 1839 an advertisement appears for Nankin [sic] mats, which would be Chinese, that list red check and “red and white Brussels patterns.”¹⁴

Although red mats are found in both India and China matting advertisements, the red dyes used in Chinese

textiles were not considered high quality until the 1920s, so it is unlikely that grass matting in the nineteenth century would have had very steadfast red dyes if they came from China.¹⁵

Conversely, Indian reds were developed early on for dyeing textiles. Cochineal based dyes had traveled from South America to Europe, the Middle East, and India by the eighteenth century.

¹³ “Advertisements,” *Southern Patriot* (Charleston, SC), 14 April 1836, Newsbank, via Richland County Public Library (accessed 15 April 2010).

¹⁴ “Advertisements,” *Southern Patriot* (Charleston, SC), 18 March 1839, Newsbank, via Richland County Public Library (accessed 15 April 2010).

¹⁵ Murray L. Eiland, *Chinese and Exotic Rugs* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1979), 25-26.

These dyes produce a range of reds, oranges, and magentas.¹⁶ Blues and yellows were produced in both India and China, but China is considered to have a significant advantage with blue dyes.

China mastered varying shades of both blue and yellow before they did with other colors.¹⁷ They often produced textiles based on blue and white or blue and yellow tonalities.¹⁸

Oranges and purples were almost unknown in China until

synthetic dyes were produced.¹⁹ Using this general analysis, [Figure 5](#)



the grass mats with reds, purples, and magentas likely came from India, *Figures 2-4*. The mats with blues probably came from China, *Figures 5-7*. Although it is possible that the Aiken family had Chinese matting with red patterns, they probably would not have lasted as long as the red mats from India.



[Figure 6](#)

In Charleston newspapers, matting is most often advertised alongside oilcloth and carpeting. Most commonly linked with oilcloth, they were considered an affordable flooring option. For more affluent homes like the Aiken-Rhett House, grass matting would have been

used in the summer. Throughout the years, advertisements confirm that they were sold for this purpose by appearing more frequently in the spring and summer and repeating calls for spring and summer goods.

¹⁶ Ibid, 179-180.

¹⁷ Ibid, 26-27.

¹⁸ Ibid, 26.

¹⁹ Ibid, 27.

Although grass mats in some homes could have been used year round, that was not the case at the Aiken home. Since Aiken was one of the wealthiest South Carolinians of his time, he would have used grass mats in the summer in place of heavier, warmer carpets. This is illustrated by a letter in which Aiken instructs his daughter, Henrietta, to pull up the winter carpets.²⁰

This was a common use of grass matting. In the popular sensationalist novel, *Aurora Floyd*, published in England in 1863, the main character describes the room of an acquaintance as a “pleasant room for the



Figure 7

summer season” due in part to the “floor being covered with India matting instead of a carpet.”²¹

Grass mats are representative of the trade relationship between the United States and China in the nineteenth century. Trade between the United States and China opened in the 1840s and was controlled through the Canton System until 1844. Under this system, trade could only be conducted at designated ports outside of the walled city of Canton. In 1844, the United States signed the Treaty of Wanghia which opened up other ports to trade between the nations. This treaty was signed two years after the First Opium War ended with the Treaty of Nanking, which called for an end to the Canton System and an opening of four other ports.²² These treaties directly correspond with a price drop in Chinese goods including matting. This probably helped

²⁰ Letter from William Aiken, Jr. to Henrietta Aiken, Aiken Family Vertical File, Historic Charleston Foundation Archives.

²¹ Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Aurora Floyd* (Richmond, England: West & Johnston, 1863), <http://docsouth.unc.edu/impls/braddon/braddon.html> (accessed 20 March 2010). Although this relates to an English home, English and American tastes were so similar that an argument can be made that something commonly seen in an English home could also be seen in a Charleston home. Additionally, the copy of the book used for digitization was reprinted in Charleston, so it can be certain that some of the Aiken’s contemporaries would have read this book and identified with the cultural components in it.

²² The Opium Wars were trade related conflicts between England and China in the mid-nineteenth century. For discussion on China Trade, Crossman, 15-33.

cement the popularity of Chinese mats, which start to become more frequent in advertisements in the 1840s and 1850s.

Trade with China continued to be an American concern throughout the nineteenth century even after they gained Most Favored Nation status under the Treaty of Wanghia.²³ In 1863, the New York Herald reported on the Confederate seizure of a ship traveling to New York from China. Among the trade goods on the ship were 2,500 rolls of matting.²⁴ Although these sorts of notices would have been printed regardless of their destination or departure, it is still important to note the inclusion of matting in the lists of seized trade goods.

The amount of grass mats in nineteenth century homes, the patterns and styles, and where they came from may not be possible to exactly ascertain. Like so many everyday items, they were not treated with the same care that fancier wool and silk flooring was. Floor coverings tend to deteriorate more quickly than most household objects because they suffer under the feet and furniture of their owners, and grass mats were not considered important decorative arts. The lack of definitive information does not mean that grass mats cannot be interpreted. The fact that they were considered everyday objects illustrates the strength and influence of the Chinoiserie movement. The saturation of East Asian goods in the Western market shows the mixture of exoticism and common place that defined objects brought into America through the China trade.

Grass mats are also a great illustration of the inevitable gaps in the historic record. In museums and historical societies, objects like these mats can provide transparency to visitors on the research and interpretation process. In a place like the Aiken-Rhett House, where preservation is an integral part of the narrative, the story of these mats can educate the public on why preservation is important and how quickly objects can deteriorate. The Aiken-Rhett grass

²³ Title used for Western nations with greater specific trade rights.

²⁴ "The Situation," *The New York Herald*, 3 March 1863, The Civil War Collection, via Accessible Archives (accessed 10 April 2010).

mats are beautiful, and it is unfortunate that more matting does not survive, so they are an excellent collection to demonstrate the processes of research, preservation, and interpretation in museums and preservation societies.

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