

## **Aiken-Rhett #1**

### **RECOLLECTIONS OF THE AIKEN-RHETT HOUSE 1969-1984 J. KENNETH JONES**

I moved to Charleston after graduation in June 1969. My first apartment, in a carriage house on Hassell St., was found to have a very leaky roof and I soon stumbled on to a house at 52 Society Street. The house had been renovated but the owners had been transferred and I rented the main house for \$125.00 per month. The basement floor was occupied by William Nichols, grandson of Dr. and Mrs. Joe Waring of Old Town Plantation. Bill Nichols was a great promoter of Charleston and became somewhat of a tutor in Charleston history. Weekends were sometimes spent walking through various sections of the city. One excursion was to a house in a run down area nearby, which he considered one of the hidden gems of the city. It was of course the William Aiken house at 48 Elizabeth St. I remember being suitably impressed with the property, and it was explained that it was occupied by Francis Dill Rhett, widow of I' on Rhett. In fact her large old black sedan (a Buick, I think ) was parked on the street in front of the Elizabeth St. entrance. The house was shuttered and the Mary Street gates were closed so we did not get to view the courtyard.

I think it was about a year later when I inquired about a for sale sign on the corner store at Elizabeth Street And Charlotte Street. The agent told me that the same owner was also offering a house just down the block at 14 Elizabeth Street. I ended up renting then buying the house. Mrs. Rhett's black sedan could be seen parked by the front door on Elizabeth Street. I think it was just before moving in that I noticed the car was missing. I somehow found out that Francis Rhett had moved in with her sister on Legare St., and 48 Elizabeth was vacant.

Later that fall, right after Thanksgiving, several of us walked up from my house to 48 Elizabeth St. This time one of the rear gates was open and we went into the courtyard. The first thing that I noticed was that the privy on the left (North West rear corner) Had been recently dug by bottle hunters. They had pulled up quite a bit of wood flooring and both the flooring and the excavated dirt was tossed out and straddling the door. It was high enough that the door would no longer close. The dirt was very obviously recent and on Thanksgiving day my privy at 14 Elizabeth had been dug while I was out to dinner. The bottle hunters were using the Sanborn Insurance maps to locate the privy's and just going in without the owners permission. Most of the property in the surrounding neighborhood, at that time, was rental so if questioned they said they had the owners permission. Further into the courtyard I seem to remember that the two carriages (later taken top Middleton Place) were still in the carriage house. Francis Rhett's black sedan was nosed into one of the carriage house openings and a post and portion of a stall had been removed so that it could be pulled in all the way to the brick rear wall. Leaving the Carriage house I looked up and saw an elderly black lady in an open window on the second floor above the kitchen. We all waved, I think to let her know we were not up to anything, but we did not go into the kitchen building. Under the rear sandstone steps the door under the house was open so we went inside. It was very dark and three of the interior doors were locked. The room under the east parlor was open but I can only remember a long grain or vegetable bin along the south wall and a lot of what looked like kindling wood. We left the basement, waved good-by to the lady in the kitchen window and walked on out.

After this inspection tour I did not enter the property again until the Museum personnel met there for a tour many years later. I did however drive by occasionally and if I noticed the rear double gates open I would stop and pull them closed.

Several years later there was a rumor that the family was asking permission to demolish the house. This of course was incorrect but they were asking to remove the porches in front of the dining room and east end of the parlors. The porches had a considerable amount of rot especially on the 2 eastern corners. During a rather strong rainstorm a column had fallen and hit the house immediately to the east. Chittwood Wrecking was hired to remove the porches. The columns, railings and balusters were stored under the remaining section of porch.

I later was told by Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Maybank that during the demolition, unknown to them, the house was entered and quite a bit of furniture, especially from the second floor, was stolen I specifically recall them mentioning several four poster beds and other smaller items being taken. Chitwood was contacted and the police were called but unfortunately since no one actually observed the theft they would not do anything to follow up on the theft or make any attempt to recover the stolen items. The News and Courier had a story and I believe a picture of the porches being removed. I would estimate this happening somewhere between 1974 or very early 1975. Years later after the museum had owned the house for a while I lived across the street at 17 Judith St., one night I looked out my second floor window and saw two older black males with a pick up or station wagon on Elizabeth St. One man was inside the Aiken front fence and was passing porch balusters over to the other. I called the police and then grabbed my 22 rifle and ran out my front door. They made a hasty retreat and I never saw them again. They will never know that the rifle was not loaded and in fact it had has never been fired!

Sometime early in 1972 I was hired by the Charleston Museum as Curator of Decorative Arts and Cultural History (lots of words for General History Curator). The museum's building on Rutledge Ave., built in 90 days for the Reunion of Confederate Veterans in 1899, was deteriorating, it was an obvious fire hazard and it was too small for the collections. The museum staff was actively involved in a campaign to gather public support for a bond issue to construct a new building. Eventually, with public support behind the museum, the choice of sites was narrowed down and included the site of a former auto dealership at the corners of Mary, John and Meeting Streets. As soon as this site looked like the final choice I strongly encouraged the Museum Director, Don Herold, to consider the possibility of incorporating the Aiken House into the plans. I already knew that Francis Rhett's nephew, Theodore Maybank had a connection to the property and I believe Don Herold either contacted him or Mrs. Rhett's attorney. Whoever it was we were soon contacted by Joseph and Josephine Maybank (Joseph was Theodore's brother) who arranged for Mr. Herold, myself, and several museum staff members to inspect the property. They had assumed the roll of caretaker after Francis Rhett left to live with her sister Pauline Dill on Legare Street. I described what it was like entering that house for the first time in an article I wrote for the Preservation Society in 1990, so there is no need to repeat what I wrote. All I can say was I was totally hooked!

Over the next few months the tour was often repeated as we formulated a plan of how we would put the property to use. Both City and Councils had to be convinced we were not taking on something that would not become a liability. The idea we came up with was that the house was to serve as a decorative arts center to showcase the museum's

## AIKEN-RHETT #2

Within days of the final decision that the Museum would acquire the property I received a phone call from Henry Cauthen of the Preservation Society to report that things were being thrown out of the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor windows of the Aiken House on the Elizabeth St. side. I rushed over and as I turned the corner there was the amazing sight of thousands of feathers covering both the sidewalk and street and blowing all around the immediate neighborhood. It turned out that Joseph and Josephine, in addition to removing family items, had decided that it would be a poor reflection on the family to turn the house over to the Museum without at least attempting to do a bit of straightening up and house cleaning. The feathers were the end result of several feather mattresses being thrown out from the second floor. These were the mattresses from the beds stolen by the porch removal crew. There was other debris on the ground but nothing of importance. I might add here that items being tossed out of the Aiken-Rhett second floor windows had attracted some attention so we will never know if anything of importance was lost in the earliest stage of this initial clean out, but they had also worked on the prior afternoon.

A quick conference with the Maybanks', myself and the museum director led to my being designated to work with them and insure that nothing was discarded relating to the house or family. This also began a long and friendly relationship with the Maybanks'. Often after a days work they would have me over for a quick dinner and afterwards we would sit around and talk over a drink or two. Joseph had had an operation for cancer of the mouth about a year or more before, which resulted in some speech difficulty, but he was determined and I was able to learn a lot about the family and the house. They were very proud that house was being taken over by the museum and would eventually be enjoyed by the public. The interior of the house was literally a shambles. Years of being vacant and an undetermined number of break-ins, along with the associated serious looting had left their visible marks. Shutters with missing louvers allowed pigeons to roost between the shutter and the window sash. Neighborhood children tossing rocks through top floor windows of the "Haunted House" let others into the top floor. The floors, especially those on the upper levels, were strewn with papers, mattresses, broken furniture, and a lot of just plain junk. By the time Francis Rhett left the house she was using The dining room (with electric heat panels), the small modern kitchen addition, the library, and the gallery on the first floor. The double parlors had been closed for many years. I was told that after the death of Harriet Rhett the parlors were photographed and then the contents dispersed among the heirs.

There was no electricity or gas in the house and the lack of power made finding your way around a real challenge, especially on the first level. The solid panel main floor shutters were all tightly closed and the second floor received only diffused light through the louvered shutters. We used a lot of flashlight batteries! The key box contained keys for various doors in the house. I think almost all the main level Aiken doors had functioning locks, as did the 2<sup>nd</sup> level room above the dining room. The quality of these mahogany doors and their heavy locks prevented access to much of the main level other than by entering through the large shutters on the porch.

The double parlors had not been used as functioning rooms in years. There were two of the standing torcheres in the rooms along with The piano. The chandeliers were hanging but had a lot of prisms on the floor. The two over-mantle mirrors and one corner

mirror were missing, apparently taken by a family member during the division of property. The carpet on the west parlor floor was black from years of coal dust (later after the museum had owned the house for some time we saw the floral pattern appearing on a walking path to the east parlor). At either side of the pocket doors were marble statues in the west drawing room. The marble statue by Canova on the left, A Child with a Bird on the right. A third marble figure was in the corner of the east parlor. Joseph said these were originally in the art gallery and had been relocated to the parlors early in the last century. I think the sliding doors were closed and locked between the two parlors, and both the door at the top of the landing into the west parlor and the door from the library into the east parlor were kept locked. Josephine Maybank said someone had gotten into the parlors through the front porch shutters on at least one occasion, but could not get through into the main house. There had been an attempt to drill through the door at the top of the landing, but the hard mahogany proved too tough for the would be thief and he gave up. Just inside the door from the library to the east parlor one of the Rhetts'; Joseph thought it was probably A. B. Rhett; had set up a small work area with a roll top desk (previously removed), an oak file cabinet and some bookshelves made up from old wood packing crates stacked three high. An electric outlet near the bust or fireplace provided power for a lamp. I do not remember the desk being there but the packing crates and file cabinet still were. This may be where I found the fighting gamecock spurs with their large needle like hook and leather strap. One of the Rhett brothers raised game birds. The marble bust by Powers was on its pedestal next to these stacked crate bookcases. The statue had a repair to the neck and some chips, I was told that a servant had somehow knocked it off the pedestal sometime in the distant past. The way things were placed around in these two parlors suggests to me that they did not suffer from the amount of theft and disruption as was seen elsewhere in the house.

The painting of Harriet Lowndes is one item that I have been a bit unclear with. The article I wrote for Preservation Progress in 1990 says it had been removed to the Gibbes Art Gallery for safe keeping prior to the museum becoming involved in the house. The story I now remember is that after several break ins the Maybanks' asked the Gibbes if they could store the two largest of the two paintings. The Gibbes accepted the large painting by Luther Terry which is often referred to as being a depiction of Romeo and Juliet (actually I think it is of Paolo and Francesca, with her guardian peeking around in the background). The painting of Harriet Lowndes was too large to get into their general storage area, but was housed elsewhere in the Gibbes' building. The Luther Terry painting was returned from the Gibbes when the house was being opened for tours,. The Gibbes did an inspection of the portrait of Harriet Lowndes which revealed that it was in such a delicate condition that it was in danger of being lost. The family offered the painting to the Charleston Museum, if it would accept responsibility for the restoration. The Greenville Museum of Art was at that time trying to set up a conservation studio and workshop which they envisioned as becoming a major regional conservation workshop. The head of this effort came down to Charleston to do a conservation report on Harriet Lowndes which took place at the Gibbes Art Gallery. . The results of the report showed that immediate action was necessary. The museum was not able to fund the complete restoration cost but an alternative plan was worked out. The conservation center would undertake the necessary work at a very reduced cost with the understanding that the painting could remain on exhibit at the Greenville County Museum of Art for a period of no less than one year. I think Greenville was also intending to use the

restoration as an example of their work. I remember when the painting was later returned that it was brought in through one of the large windows.

The dining room was empty with the exception of the NY Meeks style Empire sideboard, with marble columns, the large mahogany dining table, and a bronze Argand chandelier hanging above the table. The ceiling height mirror above the mantle was still in place. The north window was almost entirely covered in vines growing up all 4 walls of the hidden courtyard, created when the kitchen addition was made in the 1950's (?). This was one of the rooms Francis Rhett used, up until she left the house. Unfortunately it was one of the first to be broken into after she left. The ormolu clock, copied after Notre Dame Cathedral with the glass dome which can be seen in the 1918) photo of the west parlor was stolen along with the pair of gas lights that were attached at either side of the mantle piece. I do not know if they took anything else from this room but I do have a vague memory of Mrs. Maybank saying the silver had been overlooked in a chest on the second floor. By the time I saw the house nearly all of the better pieces had been removed for safe keeping following the series of major thefts.

The library was in good condition, I recall an Argand chandelier hanging but little else in the room. The wallpaper was newer and there was no mirror above the mantle. The gas lights at either side of the mantle had been stolen at the same time as the dining room theft. The mahogany bookcases are built in and remained undamaged. The gilt wood Empire mirror with the seahorse crest was brought back at a later date, just prior to the museum opening the house for tours. The gilded scrolling iron arms were detached when it came back and I stored them in one of the bookcase compartments.

The first floor stair hall was the main point of entry almost every time the house was broken into. No matter what the Maybanks did the thieves always found a way to get those doors open. The wood pedestal placed in the curl of the staircase once held a bronze figural gas light of a classical female figure with one arm upright holding a gas light. The gas pipe went down through the floor and connected in the basement below. That figural light was stolen soon after Francis Rhett left the house. The museum later used a spelter, bronze finish gas light to replace the missing one. Mrs. Maybank commented that the stolen figure was considerably larger than the replacement. I also have a very vague memory of her mentioning that there once had been some form of a curved bench or settee that fit into the staircase curve.

The marble entry hall was totally intact except for the glass on the entry door, side light and skylight. I do not recall a single piece of intact glass surviving. Judging from fragments the glass was frosted, I do not recall any fragments having a design. Later when we were preparing the house for opening The museum cabinet maker replaced the missing glass with sand blasted glass to simulate the original. He also undertook repairs to the mullions and to the door framing. While these repairs were being made I noticed two square plugs or inserts in the marble threshold which seemed to indicate a different configuration of sidelight supports at either side of the door. Later while doing research for the National Register Application I spotted the exact same marble quoin block surround, that is on the Aiken door surround, being used on the Greek Revival entry door on The Old Merchants House in NYC. Information about the Old merchants House stated that the marble was quarried by prisoners at the State Penitentiary at Ossening NY (better known as Sing Sing). The measured drawings from HABS showed the door complete with its' classical Greek columns and pediment. Now the plugs on the threshold made complete sense, Aiken had re designed his front door during the 1858

remodeling replacing the classical style with a more updated entry door, but the marble quooin blocks were retained from the original.

Several details need mentioning about this entrance foyer. The finished plaster walls were originally wallpapered. When we first acquired the house the wallpaper seams were still visible on the totally un-painted walls. When we removed the gas wall sconces for cleaning small fragments of wallpaper were found behind the back plates of the sconces. These fragments were carefully removed and placed in storage at the main museum building. The wall sconces themselves, made of white metal or spelter, never impressed me as being of a quality that matched the other surviving sconces from the house. They looked to me to be more typical of an 1880's replacement. I was later to discover the reason no wallpaper survived on the walls. During a cold winter the marble and plaster absorbed the cold. In the early spring the warm moist air condensed on the walls and stairs. The walls literally ran with water and eventually all traces of the paper simply fell off. The French Empire chandelier was hanging in the center of the ceiling, however it was owned by an Aiken heir residing in Camden. It was purchased by the museum from the owner (more about that transaction later). The baseboards were originally marbleized I think in a black with lighter graining. When Dick Jenrette offered to pay for the hallway restoration the one stipulation he required was that the walls and woodwork be faux finished to his specifications. I was totally opposed to this treatment but the interim museum director, a retired bank personnel director, only saw dollar signs and approved the project. This contributed to my decision to accept the job as curator at the Flagler Museum. I was not mad at Mr. Jenrette, but I was very opposed to any restoration that did not follow known details about the room. The decision to allow the new version was made by a temporary director with no museum or preservation background. Before work commenced Mr. Peeler, the museum cabinetmaker, and I covered a section of baseboard on the upper landing with canvas, drywall compound and a coat of primer to preserve a section of the original painted finish. One specific detail in the entry hall was never fully explained. Under the landing and between the real door into the basement and the false doorway was what appeared to be a stovepipe hole which could be seen from the basement side of the wall. The hole had been plastered over on the stairway side, and I do not recall ever figuring out what chimney was used to vent the pipe. The only explanation I was ever to come up with was that during the period of General Beauregard's using the house as headquarters perhaps the sentry needed some heat. Another answer just occurred that perhaps they were also trying to solve the problem of spring time condensation.

The gallery was in poor condition. There was a lot of peeling paint. The statuary niche in the north east corner was severely damaged by water entering the structure from a very small drain hole or scupper through the corner of the parapet roof. I always felt that an opening double or triple in size would have allowed for the water to more flow freely and possibly avoid being plugged by leaves and twigs. The large statue of Mary Madeline was still there but nothing else was in the room. I was told by the Maybanks' that in past years various family members would celebrate Christmas in the house. Christmas dinner was served in the dining room and the tree set up in the gallery. I always thought a Christmas tree set up below the skylight would be spectacular but I think there may have originally been a chandelier in this spot. When the museum accepted the property the museum trustees stipulated that the museum could do nothing to the house until the move to the new building had been accomplished. We were forced

to sit back and ignore the house other than general inspections. Unfortunately during this time the deterioration by water intrusion escalated . What had been a problem in just one corner grew to involve the entire room. The museum seemed to always have financial problems, the move from the old building to a new climate controlled, four building structure, resulted in major increases in both the maintenance staff and in utilities.(I seem to recall our utility bill in the new building for one month being what we paid for an entire year in the old building). There just did not ever seem to be funds available for the necessary repairs to the Aiken House. I suppose with this in mind, perhaps I was too dogmatic about the use of the donated funds for the restoration of the entry and gallery.

On the second floor Francis Rhett used the room above the library (with a tub, sink and gas heat) and the east front bedroom (with an oil heater).. The other two rooms on the west side of the main house were probably once set up as bedrooms, but other than a large double door mahogany wardrobe (1858 vintage), in the front west bedroom, I do not recall much in furnishings. I remember a very large chest on the east wall of the upper hall. There was a massive triple section wardrobe on the west wall of the upper hall. The large chest may be the one the silver was found in. A bronze Argand hanging light hung from two of its three chains near the staircase, I suspect the result of an attempted theft. The floors were strewn with papers books and all sorts of general debris scattered by the looters in their haste to snatch grab and be gone. And of course there was the dirt and coal soot which had filtered throughout the house from the numerous unused coal burning fireplaces. Broken windows had allowed pigeons the get in. Some rooms were worse than others. Anything easily portable had already been stolen or removed by the family.

The large room above the dining room was by far the worst room to work in, yet it was also the most beautiful room on the second floor. It had supposedly been closed and unused since 1918 or before. Some light filtered through the shutters on the south side where there had once been a porch. The north exterior wall was almost entirely covered with vines from the hidden courtyard which blocked out most light. Many of those vines had long tendrils extending into the room through broken panes of glass. The door had been kept securely locked so nothing seemed to be disturbed. A large mahogany sleigh bed stood at the far corner with a mahogany canopy frame suspended from the ceiling. Two high style gilt framed mirrors faced each other from above the fireplace and on the opposite wall. The gas lights were still in place. This was probably the room that the two half circle upholstered benches or settees were found, There was the ever present assortment of broken boxes, crates and trunks scattered about. The floor still covered in the remains of the original wall to wall straw matting. Everything in this room was black with a coating of coal dust. The coal dust and dirt that was in the air was so thick it could be seen in what few light beams made it into the room. It was very difficult to breathe. Later when museum staff and volunteers were carefully sorting and cleaning in this room it was necessary to wear a breathing mask We could only work short periods of time and whwn done you only wanted to go home and take a bath.

I always felt the original purpose of this room was a family drawing room which was later used as a bedroom by simply changing a few furnishings, however it might also have been intended as the master bedroom, either use would work well.

The third floor was much the same as the second except there was more light. It was however , where some of the most important documentation was found. The front west room had a lot of papers scattered about, once I was sorting a pile of papers and found a

neatly tied bundle on the floor with a group of other material. The packet contained papers and documents from the Civil War era and included Robert Barnwell Rhett's personal printed draft, from Mobile Ala., of the Confederate Constitution with his hand written annotations for suggested changes. There was also some confederate money and other Rhett Civil War related documents. The Aiken letter with the art gallery plan and other Aiken documents probably came from this room. I do not recall what furniture other than trunks, the upper rooms in the main section of the house contained. There may have been the remains of wall-to-wall grass matting in some of these rooms.

Mrs. Maybank told me that a desk had been stolen from the third floor (either from the front room where I found the Rhett papers, or from outside this room in the hall). She said the desk contained a lot of early papers and documents. Years later I was told that a dealer in Virginia or Maryland had a group of Civil War era documents for sale, some of which mentioned the name Rhett. We may also have been told they came from Charleston. I was somehow able to convince the dealer to send them down on approval. When they arrived it was very evident that they had come from the Aiken House, and many related to Aiken's son-in-law A.B. Rhett. I questioned the dealer but he would not reveal how he acquired them, other than that they were in a desk he had bought from a picker. I think he may have become nervous with the inquiry and asked for their return, which I of course refused to comply with. I told him we would be willing to buy them for reasonable price or would have an attorney look into the matter (I fabricated that threat). He decided on the sale option and Arthur Wilcox (a museum trustee) convinced Peter Manigault to fund the purchase, probably through the News and Courier. I seem to recall that the 'Enrollment Roster for Rhett's Brigade' was among these papers. They are supposedly now in the museum archives.

All of the documentation we acquired with the house should be listed in the files with either Francis Dill Rhett, or Estate of Francis Dill Rhett as the donor. The various members of the Rhett family apparently stored items and documents in the basement and third floor rooms.

The storage room located on the third floor north east corner contained large cabinets and chests for summer storage of draperies and wool rugs. Under one of the cabinets on the hallway side of the room I discovered a pair of French Empire ormolu candlebra some of the arms were bent and a socket or two was missing They were black with dirt and age. Mrs. Maybank took them home and the next time I saw them they had been cleaned and placed on the serving table in their dining room. In the large chest on the north wall was found the bound and loose sheet music collection of Henrietta and her mother Harriet. If this collection was stacked on top of each other it would probably measure at least 2.5' or 3' in height. I remember this collection being in my office for cataloging, and I think we got the collection directly from the house instead of being stored and then returned. The donor should be listed as Francis Dill Rhett or Estate of Francis Dill Rhett.

If I am correct, in our brief discussion about the difficulty in viewing the complete collection of Aiken sheet music, I think you said the museum had catalogued it as being from Miss. Pauline Dill, the sister of Francis'. This does not seem correct to me. Miss Dill would not have had this particular collection, that I remember seeing on the third floor of the Aiken house. Shortly after I left the museum in 1984 Miss Pauline Dill died . She left her house at 19 Legare St. and contents (in addition to her share of The Dill Plantation) to the Charleston Museum. If there is sheet music in the museum collection



with her listed as a donor it probably is her own collection of sheet music. It may also be possible that some of that music originated with from the Aiken house.

When Francis relocated to Miss Dill's house they did take a few things to use in her room. Following the death of Francis, Miss Dill sent over to the museum the two "Old Master" paintings which came from the Aiken House. They were dropped off by her odd jobs man and driver at the museum's back door They were supposed to be by the 17<sup>th</sup> century Italian artist Salvatore Rosa. They are either actually by him or by a close imitator It has been a long time but I think they measured about 28"x18", give or take a few inches in either direction. I do not remember Miss Dill sending over any other items from her sister but I could be wrong. These should technically have been accessioned as part of the Francis Dill Rhett estate but they may have been listed with Pauline Dill as the donor. When I talked to Miss Dill about them she said they were originally from the Aiken House and had been hung in Francis' room when she moved to Legare St..

The basement rooms really did not have much left of original Aiken items. I seem to recall the warming kitchen had a table with simple gas ceiling fixture above. A large cupboard in the south east corner held a few old gas lamp globes. Another cupboard or pie safe was on the south wall to the right of the window that was under the porch. The room below the library had a lot of mainly oak or pine furniture and a lot of just plain junk. The same holds true for the hall and the room under the west parlor (which had served as the coal storage room. Some of these doors in the basement had been nailed closed to keep out the looters.

The service buildings at the rear had been fairly well cleaned out by the time the museum became involved. The two carriages had been sent to Middleton Place for safe keeping. Mrs. Rhett's black sedan had been taken by a distant family member. The carriage house had a number of large cabinets stored near the tack area, I seem to recall them being about eight feet tall they apparently came from another location and were stored in the carriage house. The kitchen building was also devoid of any notable items, other than the brick ovens and warmers. The staff dining room at the north end had an assortment of boxes crates etc. but I do not recall anything specific. The main kitchen may have had a work table or two still remaining. The lower section of handrail was missing from the rear sandstone steps

In the late 1940's or early 1950's a concrete block kitchen was added between the old kitchen building and the main house. I suspect this dates from when I'on and Francis married. I recall an interior door so that a cook or servant living in the kitchen wing could enter the house without going outside. The addition created a fourth wall behind the dining room leaving a courtyard with no access. When the museum took over one of our first chores was to cut the bases of the vines so they would die off and could be removed/ they covered all four walls and basically sealed the dining room's north shutters in the closed position., above they extended into the large room above the dining room.

Following the transfer of the property to the museum, the museum staff and volunteers packed up all surviving items in the house, took down the valances and draperies, carefully labeled and removed items such as the matting etc. and moved it all to the museum for safe keeping and some cleaning. A select few items, mainly unusually large pieces or items that would be a storage challenge, remained in the house. The Museum Trustees had stipulated that the staff focus had to be on the move into a new building and we were not to do anything with the Aiken House until we were settled in the new

building. We properly secured the house and then sat back in the hope the trustees might loosen the regulations. I made regular inspection tours to make sure there were no problems.

I do not recall exactly when we installed the electrical panel or the alarm, I do not think it was immediately. The electric panel was installed with a few temporary overhead lights in the basement and an electrical romex type cable coming up through the gas pipe hole on the stair hall and then extending up through the stair hall to the third floor. The city allowed this since it was considered a work type temporary installation. We would now be able to have an outlets on each floor for some lights and we could run a vacuum cleaner. The power company installed a three wire service in anticipation of future needs. After the service was activated we noticed that our light bulbs in the basement were not lasting long. It turned out the power company had switched two of the wires and we were getting 220 volts through each socket. It was a simple fix and did no damage. The alarm was installed just before we started bringing things back to the house. In addition to the Aiken items we were putting Decorative Arts Dept. furnishings on the third floor in preparation for the museum's move into the new building.

It is interesting to note that in all the time the museum owned the property there had been only one break-in, and that was by the grandson of a S. C. Judge who was caught with a friend inside the house shortly after the alarm was installed. I do not recall what happened to him but I do know his grandfather was not amused. The lack of break-ins can probably be explained by publicity associated with the transfer to the museum and that the pickers and/or antique dealers involved with the thefts knew everything had been removed. Speaking of antique dealers and pickers I doubt we will ever know exactly who was involved with the thefts. The dealer from Virginia or Maryland, that had the Rhett Civil War documents, said that they were in a desk he bought from a picker. I have long suspected that more than one local shop or flea market dealer had items from the house, but there was no documentation to prove where the items came from even if someone was suspected. With no actual proof and considering the amount of time elapsed we will probably never know. There has always been a lack of documentary photographs showing the various room interiors with furnishings in place. The only hope is that if something was sold locally someday it might be identified and returned.

Years before the museum became involved, I bought a small NY type mahogany wardrobe with unusual feet that resembled a short inverted beehive leg and a carved lions paw foot. It was purchased, in good faith, from a prominent local dealer. It was in need of repair and refinishing, but the thing I remember was the top had a lot of pigeon droppings. I now suspect it may have come from the third floor east room, which had a number of pigeons inside. But I still do not know for sure

19<sup>th</sup> century collections. The main floor would highlight Aiken and his two 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter 19<sup>th</sup> century remodelings. The second floor older sections were to focus on the Federal style with some rooms used with showcases and other exhibits. Swapping an Aiken Era mantle for a Federal mantle would return the room to the John Robinson period. The warming kitchen below the dining room would be a static exhibit of a mid 19<sup>th</sup> century kitchen. The rear court yard and the associated buildings would be a self guided tour area but would also be used as a teaching facility for school children.

Finally the decision was announced that the museum would be built on the Meeting Street site. Soon afterward Don Herold received a call asking if the museum wanted the Aiken property. Throughout all of our tours and discussions we had assumed that if The property was to be made available it would involve a purchase price.

I do not recall all of the legal technicalities but I think I am fairly accurate in the following: The house had passed from Governor Aiken to his wife Harriet, and after her death to their daughter Henrietta. Henrietta's husband, Albert Burnett Rhett had predeceased her (I think about 1877). I think Henrietta died about 1918 leaving 4 children to divide the property. About 1948 I'on Rhett bought out the survivor's interest giving him sole ownership of the property. The contents had probably been divided at the death of Henrietta. One item in particular, the entrance hall chandelier, remained in the house but was not owned by I'on Rhett. (There will be more about this later). When I'on Rhett married Francis Dill Rhett (They had married late in life) in the early 1950's (?), it changed the legal heirs so that after I'On's death the property passed to Francis's and then to her designated heirs. I think that is how her nephews Theodore and Joseph Maybank entered the title chain.

Theodore Maybank owned a local insurance agency. He and his wife, Mary, had no children. They owned a home on Rainbow Row and were not interested in taking even partial ownership of the Aiken property. His brother Joseph, who had served as a merchant seaman, and his wife Josephine had one child, named Mary, after Theodore's wife Mary. She was looked on like she was their own daughter and it was my understanding that young Mary was the principal heir to both Maybank brothers. This was extremely important since it was young Mary who, as a high school student of about 17 years old, had to relinquish the potential of a sizable inheritance in the form of the Aiken -Rhett property.

The Historic Charleston Foundation also figured into the picture since they had apparently been left the option of acquiring the property in Francis Rhett's will. The HCF was not, at the time interested in taking over the property so they signed off in favor of the museum. I did not take an active part in all of these negotiations but I am sure the Transfer of Title documents spell it out more clearly.

Finally all parties concerned reached agreement and the property was scheduled for transfer to the museum. This is also the point that I personally, as curator, became even more intensely involved with the property and the family.

## **AIKEN-RHETT #3**

### **NOTES**

#### **Joseph and Josephine Maybank**

To me these two were the low key, unsung heroes of the Aiken Rhett House. They both had a special feeling for the house and the history it represented. They were the ones called at three or four in the morning to go and re-secure the doors forced open by the thieves, sometimes more than once in a single evening. Immediately after Francis Rhett was relocated to her sister's, the dining room was broken into. The Notre Dame clock and the gas lights from both the dining room and the library were all stolen. The Maybanks immediately began removing easily portable items and valuables from the house and storing them in their home on Tradd Street (I seem to recall it being 186 Tradd St. ). They removed all the remaining gas wall lights except from the room above the dining room. As time progressed they were called out to re-secure the house with an increasing frequency. One of the worst break-ins occurred on New Years Eve 1975, just prior to the museum showing interest in the house. They responded to a call from the police and found the back hall door had been forced open. A van had been reported leaving the rear gates. The thieves had apparently filled the van but had no room for about 10 or 12 chairs that were left lined up in the courtyard. The Maybanks's moved the chairs back inside and re-secured the hall door. The next day they returned to determine what had been stolen and found that the thieves had returned for the chairs that they could not take on the first load.

In addition to all the problems at the Aiken house, Josephine had taken on the responsibility for driving Miss Pauline Dill to doctors' appointments, grocery and pharmacy trips. Francis was bed ridden, suffering I think what is now known as Alzheimer's but what was then whispered to be dementia. She had at least part time, and it may have been 24 hour, care. In addition she was caring for her husband, Joseph, who had survived a very serious operation for mouth cancer that left him with a speech difficulty. Joseph and Josephine's daughter Mary was about 16 or 17 when I met her, a young girl that would make any parent proud.

The Maybank's were not wealthy. I do not have any knowledge of Francis' will or any other aspect of who got what or who had to agree to the museum receiving the house as a gift. I do know that the three of them never once let the potential of future value enter their decision making process. Their first consideration was always that the property be preserved and enjoyed by the public. I say this because both then and now I do not think they ever received the recognition they deserved. That said they would probably have done their best to avoid it. That is the kind of people they were.

I do not have any knowledge of how items from the Aiken house were disbursed prior to the museum's entering the picture. I know of some items that were moved to Joseph and Josephine's home for safe keeping. I am sure there are probably other relatives that over the years acquired select items. The Maybank's home was just not large enough to hold it all. The Aiken double parlors and the upstairs family drawing room or bedroom (above the dining room), were the least disturbed of any area in the house. The looters may have accounted for more losses than I give them credit for. Not having been through the house when Francis was in residence, I have no base line to estimate what was there. I recall the Maybank's had a garage that was well filled, however I do not recall much in there of great importance. It contained mostly trunks,

boxes, and later 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century items. I would have liked to have taken a tour of their home and have them point out Aiken House items, but that was not something I specifically requested. I did not want to give the impression that the museum was being too greedy. With the passage of time I can only recall some highlights of their Tradd Street home.

The piece I was most impressed with was the mahogany serving table or sideboard in the dining room I have since learned it is probably from New York. It may have been by Allison, Lanuier, or one of the top cabinet makers active in the Classical revival period. The piece consisted of a drawer box top containing about 4 drawers, supported at the front by free standing legs, herma style, with a male head just under the drawer section. I think the legs may have been a pair of reeded columns ending in lions paw feet. The pair of French ormolu candelabra (mentioned earlier) were on top and there was silver bowl or tea set at the center. I seem to remember an early landscape painting (old master type) hanging above, but it may be where the portrait of Gov. Aiken's mother, which reminded me of those by Samuel Morse, was hanging. I remember there being a very nice table and chairs at the center of the room, but I do not recall their details. The portrait of Gov. Aiken may have been in this room also, on the wall between the French doors to the porch. There was also an old masters type painting and a pair of smaller paintings in oval carved and gilt Italian frames, but I do not recall exactly where they were hanging. I am enclosing several slides I took in June 1975, of these paintings at the Maybank's home.

One day Mrs. Maybank asked for some help getting something downstairs, possibly some boxes of books, from an upstairs storage area. I seem to recall the room being at the head of the staircase or on an upper landing. The room was practically packed to the doors with items from the house, mostly furniture. Two items always stayed in my mind because I very much wanted them for the house. One was a pair of cane seat, cane back chairs of mahogany. They were high classical Revival style and possibly by Phyfe. The other items were a pair (and possibly more) of mahogany sway back benches with curule supports and turned crossbar. These also may have been by Phyfe. I think both of these items are similar if not identical to examples in the Met. I can only imagine what was stacked in this room.

I remember the parlor was nicely furnished but no details of those furnishings remain with me.

### **FRANCIS DILL RHETT**

I never got to know Francis Dill Rhett. Based on conversations with the family I know she and I'On Rhett married late in life. Her husband I'On Rhett had inherited a portion of his mother's estate (Probably 25%) at the death of his mother Henrietta. He shared the house with his brother A. B. Rhett, who served for years as Superintendent of Public Schools of Charleston. I do not have the names of the other two siblings or their birth/death dates (I sent my information "Bible" to you already). A. B. Rhett may have still been living in the house when I'On married Francis, but he defiantly died before I'On. Following the death of her husband, Francis continued to live at 48 Elizabeth Street. The Maybank's recalled Christmas gatherings at the house and I got the impression they were quite fond of Francis. As time went by however, they became more concerned about her living in the house by herself. An older black woman, living in the rear kitchen building may have served as her cook and/or helper.

Finally they began to notice her getting more forgetful. About 1970, during a visit, Joseph and Josephine checked her kitchen and found only boxes of cereal. There was also a report of an upper King Street grocer cashing checks made out to Francis. It was later determined Francis was not opening her mail and when anything was dropped through the mail slot she would place the unopened envelopes in a large Chinese urn on the upper landing. The grocer would have his delivery boy reach into the urn and grab a handful of envelopes while Francis went to get the money for her grocery delivery. Somehow word had gotten back to the Maybank's about what was happening. They had no idea how long this had been happening. Following the decision that Francis needed to move in with her sister on Legare St. Josephine discovered the urn containing the unopened envelopes many of which were uncashed dividend checks dating back over eighteen months. Over the next several months Mrs. Maybank, or Mrs. Rhett's lawyer, slowly deposited all of the checks to Francis's account. As the years passed Francis' condition deteriorated until she was almost totally bedridden and requiring 24 hour nursing care. Mrs. Maybank once told me how much that care cost but I do not recall the amount.

One detail concerning Francis and her time in the Aiken house needs to be addressed. There was once a story being told during the earliest days of the museum's tours of the house that Francis was so forgetful that she held card parties in her upstairs bathroom. Francis, like many women of her age played cards, probably bridge, on a fairly regular basis. The Aiken house did not have many rooms that were properly heated. One of the most comfortable rooms in the house was the room above the library that had a gas heater in addition to a fireplace. The room had been plumbed for a sink and tub at one side. It would make perfect sense to have a card game during the winter in the warmest room in the house. The presence of a sink and tub never made a difference. The choice of where to have the card game had no relation to her health.

When the museum started conducting tours on a regular basis, we hired one person to oversee the tours. Unfortunately the facts gave way to fiction (as often happens with tour guides) and the stories began to contain a substantial amount of skewed, unsubstantiated gossip type information. I was unaware of this problem until we got a strong letter of complaint from a family member (who also owned several original items from the house). I tried correcting the problem orally, but when that failed I sat down and compiled a factual notebook for the guides. The two large loose leaf notebooks that I sent to you were the result of that effort. I drew on information used in the National Register application along with every verified bit of information we had uncovered up to that point. The loose leaf format was intended so that new or corrected information could easily be included. I would like to think the guidebook helped.

### **French Bronze and Gilt Floor Candelabra and Dining Room Sideboard**

Two of the bronze torches in the parlors were still in place in the parlors when the museum acquired the house. I was later told that a third, from the set of four, was in the home of an Aiken descendent (Mrs. Lila Birthright) on East Battery. She also was reported to have the NY Empire Sideboard with marble columns that matched the one surviving in the Dining Room.

Mention of the fourth standing torcher came from an unidentified person who claimed to have one that matched the others. A picture may have been sent, as I recall her example sat on a bronze platform base about 4 to 7 inches tall. I think we looked at ours and found the threaded holes that would have secured its now missing base. The museum may have copies of the correspondence. I had already heard a story that while one of these Torcheres was being stored at Birlant's Antique and Auction Gallery on King Street, old Mr. Birlant said it was inadvertently sold at one of his auctions. This may be the one accidentally sold.

### **Filming of 'Swamp Thing'**

I have tried to date the filming of 'Swamp Thing' and can only guess it must have been 1980 or 1981. The alarm had been installed, the portrait of Harriet Lowndes was back in the drawing room and there was quite a bit of furniture back in the house. I think the museum may have had a fund raising Christmas tour the prior December and re-furnished the house. In addition there was a large group of the 19<sup>th</sup> century furniture from the museum on the third floor. I think Don Herold, the museum director, may have wanted to recoup the cost of installing the alarm system. Part of the deal was that nothing could be done during the filming without me, as curator, being physically present. He did agree to allow the set crew to paint the white plaster areas between the wall panels in both parlors. This area was wall papered but very little survived, I do not remember the color but it was lighter than the gray the movie people chose. The east parlor was to be set up as a dining room set for a banquet, the west parlor as a salon.

Louis Jourdan had just lost his son so he was very subdued. The filming took place in mid summer. It was to be a night scene so the shutters had to remain closed and all natural light blacked out. When they were filming with all their movie lights on the temperature must have been about 110 or 120 degrees. They could only film in short takes, then everyone reached for hand towels soaked in ice water with Sea Breeze added. It actually made it bearable. Every so often the prop director had to change the candles because the wax was so warm they would burn twice as fast or they would just fall over.

The filming progressed for about a week. I think it was late in the day on the last Friday of shooting, the director told me they had a short scene to re-shoot in the parlor the next morning, and then they would be done. The scene in question was of the dinner guests relaxing with friendly conversation in the drawing room. I opened the house and when they started the filming I was looking in from the east parlor, expecting a re-shooting of the previous night's filming, when a group of strippers from a strip joint on Calhoun Street, most of them bare breasted came in from the hallway door and sat on the laps of the actors in the parlor. All I could think of was that if the Museum Trustees or City Council ever heard about it I would be fired, Mr. Herold would be fired and any other museum employee associated with the film would be in deep trouble. I soon found out the scene was for the European version and would not be released in this country. I never did tell the museum director, I figured if he did not know he could claim no knowledge of it, and to my knowledge no one else locally ever knew about it. However I am sure there are some family members that, even today, would raise eyebrows about topless strippers in Governor Aiken's drawing room! Although I am not a member of the family, I would object also.

## **DETAILS ABOUT THE HALL CHANDELIER, GOVERNOR AIKENS BEDROOM SET, A FRENCH MANTLE CLOCK**

Soon after the the property was transferred to the museum took, a letter arrived from Camden SC. The writer informed the museum that she was the owner of the French chandelier hanging in the entrance foyer, and the fixture would be available for purchase after it was appraised, otherwise she would arrange to have it taken down. It has been a long time but I think her name was Kennedy, her first name may be Elizabeth. She and her sister a Mrs. Bowen(?), also living in Camden were, I believe, great grandchildren of Gov. Aiken. She also had a bedroom set and a clock from the house that would be available for purchase after the items were appraised.

Don Herold talked to her in the hope of getting the Chandelier donated but it turned out there were very strained relations between that branch of the family and the Maybank's. It seems that when I'On Rhett bought out his siblings' shares and consolidated the property in the 1940's, some of the heirs expected that the property would eventually be returned to their ownership. I assume this was not an actual promise on I'On's part. In any case, when I'On died and left his estate to his spouse Francis, the Camden branch of the family, at least, was greatly disappointed, and realized they no longer had valid a claim to the property. I was told that when I'on was alive whenever Mrs. Kennedy visited she never failed to mention that she owned the chandelier. Most, if not all, of the items in question were owned by Mrs. Kennedy. I believe the museum arranged to have Jack Patla Antiques appraise the chandelier. Mrs. Kennedy arranged for the bedroom set and the clock to be appraised by a Columbia S.C. antique dealer. I do not recall him coming down to appraise the chandelier. The Museum Director and I made a trip to Camden to look at those items.

When we arrived we found that the items had been stored in a garage for probably twenty years or more. The clock was a massive late French Empire clock standing about 30" high. The marble section of the case was badly damaged with the back feet nearly off, and some of the marble missing or broken. The bronze figure of General Belsarius holding a scroll from Emperor Constantine was badly corroded as was the dial. The hands were missing. The movement had a stamp "Medal D'Or 1833, Paris". Later I found the bell had a pencil inscription "repair 1863 CSA". A date on photos I took of the clock at Mrs. Kennedy's is June, 1977. (the same month I photographed the Maybank's paintings)

The 4 piece mahogany bedroom set, probably by Meeks of NY, was also in extremely poor condition. Years of sitting on a damp garage floor had caused complete finish deterioration and a lot of loose veneer. The wardrobe doors, leaning against the body, were actually resting directly on the floor and all the veneer was either loose or had fallen off on the lower 12 to 18 inches, but it was still there. The marble slab for the washstand had accidentally been switched with one from a later piece sometime in the past.

I do not remember the exact appraisal value, I think the clock was \$1,000.00 and the bedroom set was about \$2,500.00. The chandelier was about \$1,200.00 to \$1,800.00. Any items the museum wanted to buy could be purchased for the appraised price. The other items would be consigned for sale at a Columbia antique shop, probably the shop that did the appraisal.

While in Camden Mrs. Kennedy also showed us her living room that had a number of Aiken House items. Today I can only recall a very handsome rosewood stepped open



shelf etagere of the 1858 era and a small work stand or ladies writing table. Her sister's house (I think her name may have been Bowen) lived a short distance away. She also had Aiken items but I do not recall any details. After we left I recorded all the items that I thought had an Aiken House connection. That list may still be somewhere in the museum files.

After returning to Charleston The museum director said the only item the museum intended to buy was the chandelier. He did not think the bedroom set or the clock were fairly appraised due to their poor condition and the Museum had only limited funds. After thinking about it that night I asked him the next day if the museum would have any objection to my purchasing the clock and bedroom set, since the museum was not interested. He told me he thought I was a bit crazy but there would be no objection from the museum. I called Mrs. Kennedy and she agreed to the transaction with the hope that they would one day go back to the house. I paid for the purchase by using my house as collateral for a bank loan. I believe Jack Patla Antiques contributed to the museum's purchase of the chandelier

I restored the clock case and bronze, but unfortunately the Charleston clock repair person, who was restoring the movement, lost it then denied he ever had it. The clock sat there with an empty opening for years until a NAWCC member in south Florida located a later French movement, but one of the correct size, for the clock. When I left W. Palm Beach Chet & Claire Kellogg, from Charleston, bought the clock. I do not know what became of it. Their son Christopher still has their shop, Period Antiques, on King Street. He may know where the clock went.

I restored the bedroom set over a period of a year or two. Homer Peeler, the museum cabinet maker, helped with the bed that had veneer problems. When I left the museum to take the job in Palm Beach I suspected that the size of the Aiken bedroom set would be difficult to place in a small south Florida home. Someone alerted Richard Jenrette that it might be for sale. He contacted me and I sold him the set. He said he intended to return it to the Aiken-Rhett House.

Mr. Jenrette also bought a set of 4 sconces that he saw when he came over to inspect the bedroom set. (I remember there being 4, but there may have been only 2) The story of the sconces is below.

I particularly wanted to state all of the details in this transaction. After I left the museum a new staff member made some rather disturbing insinuations about me buying this set, and considering my position as curator, accusing me of being involved in an unethical type situation. I think they just did not know all the details. I bought these items with the complete approval of the museum director, and using my own funds. Chances are that if I had not purchased the bedroom set it would not be in Charleston. I did not approach Mr. Jenrette to buy the set but when he contacted me I knew it would enable the set to be returned to the Aiken Rhett House.

### **THE RAVANEL/AIKEN WALL SCONCES**

While living in Charleston I had become friends with Kitty Ravenel and her friend Richard Whitaker. They had never married but shared a common rear property line with a garden gate. I bought several things from Kitty that she had stored in her garage. One day she brought out a magnificent wall sconce of French dark bronze and

gilt. I think there was a set of 4 sconces. She wanted to sell them and wanted me to have first choice. They were expensive but my credit was good and I took them home. I cleaned them up and used them. Quite a few years later we had the Aiken house open and I happened to pass by the statue of the child holding the bird. I noticed that a faded mark at the center of the wallpaper panel to the right of the pocket doors had a brighter mark that looked a lot like the back plate of the Ravanel sconces. I brought one of the sconces in and it was an exact match.

I told Kitty Ravenel the story and her only reaction was 'so that is where they came from'. It seems her father went out one Sunday afternoon in the 1930's or early 40's and when he returned he brought in the sconces to show Kitty and her mother, which he had just bought. When asked where they came from he declined tell them. He had given his word not to say where they were from, and he did not. Kitty speculated to me that one of the Rhett brother's must have decided they did not need sconces but knew who did.

When Richard Jenrette was inspecting the Aiken bedroom set he saw the sconces and wanted them also. I told him the story of how I came to own them. He told me at the time he wanted to enjoy them for a while, but he thought they would eventually be returned to the Aiken Rhett House.

### **THE HAUNTED HOUSE TOUR**

The museum was constantly getting requests from people to see the house. One October after we had brought back most of the original furniture and added items from the museum, The Museum Director decided we could do a fund raising haunted house. No one can do a haunted house like a museum. We used items such as real skulls, a mummified baby, pickled octopus stuffed rats and whatever else we could come up with. The tour started in the entry hall went through the parlors, library and dining room then down the back stairs to the kitchen, where you could have your picture taken in a coffin, then out through the basement and exited from the room below the west parlor. Where we sold snacks. We had to hire two policeman both for crowd control and for security. We were assisted by a group of students from a local high school. After it had a very successful but brief run. The house was again closed but many of our props remained. A mannequin in the basement painted to look like wolf man was in a corner of the basement below the library.

A few weeks later we were having a series false alarms in the early hours of the morning (2-4am). It turned out to be a large moth flying in front of the back hall motion sensor. One night the alarm went off and I took the keys (I kept the keys at my house across the street) and met the ADT security people and the police so we could do a search. The police officer had a new Black recruit in tow who was not too happy about being in the 'haunted' house. The officer turned and with a wink told me to go check up on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor, he and the ADT people would cover the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> floors, while the new recruit was sent to search the basement. I did as told and it was not too long later that I heard a gunshot, followed by a lot of laughter. The veteran officer had been in the house many times before and had guessed correctly what the recruits reaction to the coming face to face with wolf boy in the basement. I am sure it was a long time before the recruit lived it down.