

Turning a Page in the History of the Aiken Family Library

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Historic Charleston Foundation and the Charleston Library Society are honored to announce a collaboration to protect and preserve the family library of Governor and Mrs. William Aiken Jr. and their descendants.

Governor William Aiken Jr. was a rice planter and served in the state House of Representatives (1838-1841), as well as in the state Senate (1842-1844). From 1844 to 1846, he served as Governor of South Carolina, and he later served three terms in the U.S. House of Representatives (1851-1857). The library was originally housed by the family in their Greek revival mansion at 48 Elizabeth Street, now the Aiken-Rhett House Museum, c. 1818, a property of Historic Charleston Foundation.

The volumes were previously transferred by the Foundation to climate controlled collections storage rooms on the third floor of the Nathaniel Russell House Museum, 51 Meeting Street, where they were catalogued but remained largely inaccessible to scholars. As the result of a collaborative effort, this collection of over 2000 volumes, mostly published in the 1800s, has recently been transferred to the Charleston Library Society archives and placed on long-term loan. Also included with this grouping are several volumes donated by descendants of Sarah and Nathaniel Russell.

Both Historic Charleston Foundation and the Library Society seek to actively preserve these books by maintaining them at the Library, which serves as a literary and historical archival center. Grahame J. Long, Curator of The Charleston Museum, provided critical technical support in the transition process. This project is an outstanding example of collaboration among institutions and colleagues, and we look forward to future public programming that will highlight the historical importance of the books collection. Through the generosity of Aiken-Rhett descendants, the Foundation continues to receive and welcome donations of signed volumes owned by the family.

“This collection provides scholars an unprecedented opportunity to study the intellectual life of Charleston families in the 1800s,” said Anne Cleveland, Library Society Executive Director.

The volumes track the Aikens’ sojourns across Europe, divulge their literary tastes, and give us tremendous insight into their personal lives. While many books were purchased from a bookseller on East Bay Street in Charleston, nearly half of the Aiken volumes were published in France, and others were written in German and Italian. In many of the books, various Aiken-Rhett family members signed their names, noted the purchase location, and inscribed a date. These inscriptions provide researchers a map and chronology of the Aiken family’s travels in America and across Europe.

Following a well-established tradition among Charleston’s wealthy, Governor Aiken and his wife, Harriet, traveled extensively in Europe and purchased many of the books in their collection there. During their travels, the Aikens also purchased new wall coverings, paintings, and sculptures for their Elizabeth Street residence. Henrietta, Governor and Mrs. Aiken’s only child, made her first trip to Paris at the age of eleven. When she was twelve, she and her mother made a trek to Brussels, where she acquired a beautifully illustrated three volume set of French fairy tale books. When she was twenty-two, Henrietta and her parents travelled to England, Eastern Europe, France, and Italy as part of their Grand Tour experience. Over thirty nineteenth-century travel guides are present in the collection. These guides, such as John Murray’s popular *Handbook for Travelers*, often include beautifully detailed fold-out maps as well as information concerning local accommodations, architectural and artistic sites, popular attractions, and shopping. One of the more complete travel guides illustrates Ireland, the country where William Aiken Sr. was born.

Classical literature also comprises a good portion of the Aiken collection. The works of Shakespeare, Voltaire, Fontaine, Sheridan, Sir Walter Scott, George Sand, and others are represented in multi-volume sets along with the poetic works of such writers as Milton, Alexander Pope, and Lord Byron. These books are beautifully illustrated, and their elaborate covers and marbled paper set them apart as cherished additions to the Aiken library. Popular fiction comprises a major component of the collection, although the majority of the 19th century authors would only publish their works anonymously. This is true for such works as *The Spy*, *The Mirror*, *The Spectator*, and *The Robber*, which were all published in three or more volumes.

These texts required the reader to buy sequential volumes in order to discover exactly how the plot would unfold.

In addition to fine literary works, Governor Aiken owned numerous volumes dedicated to the life of Napoleon as well as other biographical works on revolutionary figures such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. Maritime history was a great interest to Governor Aiken, who collected many works dealing with the naval histories of France and England in addition to the United States during the American Revolution.

Harriet and Henrietta shared a flare for gardening, fine art, manners, and foreign languages, and they owned a book of etiquette devoted to practically every country they visited. This genre includes a five volume set, titled *European Life and Manners*, written by the British authority Henry Colman. Their horticulture books range in subject matter from planting an herb garden to maintaining topiary bushes. One such addition instructs the reader on how to use flowering plants as home remedies. Many of these books were given to Henrietta, affectionately known as “Heart,” as gifts from various family members and friends.

The preservation of these publications allows us to continue to gather information that will not only provide useful insight into the reading tastes of the Aiken family but of 19th century Americans as well. To the historian, the Aiken-Rhett book collection in its totality is in many respects more meaningful than each individual volume. While intact library collections such as this one are rare windows into the personal and intellectual lives of individuals, the volumes also represent the prevailing cultural pursuits and pervasive tastes of the era.