

## The Story of Aiken

By Samantha Veniz Florida

Back when I was at Millbrook Elementary, my class went on a field trip to Hitchcock Woods. It was here where a tour guide mentioned that Aiken wouldn't be here if it weren't for a love story. Legend has it that William Aiken, Sr., the first president of the South Carolina Railroad Company, lectured Alfred Dexter, a railroad surveyor that fell for William's daughter Sara, and warned him that if there's "No railroad for me, young man, no girl for you." This insider knowledge stuck with me as time went on, so it was quite uplifting to find through my research that the couple did get married, and more importantly, William got his railroad that put our town on the map!

When you look at a map of west-central South Carolina, you will find a flag-shaped stretch of land containing pieces formerly part of Barnwell, Edgefield, Lexington, and Orangeburg that is known as Aiken County. The county itself was incorporated on March 10<sup>th</sup>, 1871, but its spirit dates to the 1830s when William Aiken Sr. ran railroad tracks through the area to connect the inlands of Hamburg to the coast of Charleston.

To the people traveling on the trains, Aiken was a breath of fresh air that gave them a place to retreat. Passengers from the Charleston end of the railroad spent their wealth in the Aiken area to avoid the malaria-plagued summer months. These trips were put on hold when the Civil War and its Battle of Aiken erupted, but they eventually resumed in the 1890s. It was around this time when northern aristocrats, specifically, took great advantage of the recreation opportunities like polo, golf, and hunting which were offered in Aiken's colder months at places like the luxurious Willcox, earning Aiken the title of being the "Winter Colony." Amongst the

winter colonists were the Michigan lawyer Henry Dibble, who is responsible for creating the “Avenue of Oaks” that frame South Boundary after wanting a more scenic route to his job at the Bank of Aiken. Hopelands Gardens is another part of Aiken graced by the presence of Southern Live Oaks, a beauty that initiated the emergence of preservation efforts like Aiken State Park, Audubon’s Silver Bluff Sanctuary, Aiken Land Conservancy, and the Carolina Bay Nature Preserve. The Gardens were planted by C. Oliver Iselin, who traveled from Rhode Island with her sister Hope Iselin, whom to the time’s equestrian community was known as “the great lady of racing.” Another integral winter colonist was the New York businessman Thomas Hitchcock who, in both the literal and metaphorical sense, made a name for himself that’s still a talking point to this day. You may have driven past his namesake of Hitchcock Woods on your way here today, or you may have attended the Spring Steeplechase hosted by the Aiken Steeplechase Association, an organization Hitchcock founded alongside Temple Gwathmey and Harry Worchester. The intersection of the urban forest and horseback riding that Hitchcock and his wife Lulie are credited for situates with the Aiken Hounds, the organization that initiates the Blessing of the Hounds hunting event.

Horses and riders partake in the Blessing of the Hounds by trekking behind the dog breed as they hunt. This event is just one of the many examples of Aiken’s equestrian traditions that continue today. Along with the aforementioned Steeplechase, the Aiken Trials and Pacers & Polo event complete the town’s Triple Crown tradition, with each attracting thousands of curious spectators eyeing this part of Aiken’s heritage every year. To balance the equestrian adrenaline rush are the assuring presence of stewarding programs like the Aiken Equine Rescue, the Great Oak Equine Assisted Programs, and the Aiken Horse Park Foundation. At the end of the day, the two tracks converge to lead Aiken’s equestrian culture forward.

As the cultural track progressed, Aiken's economic development track has progressed too. Whiskey Road, for example, became the transportation route it is known for today because of being a hub for the movement of alcohol products during the Prohibition Era. When the Cold War started brewing, the Department of Energy designated space to build the Savannah River Site. The site was originally intended to produce nuclear materials, but now it prioritizes the management of nuclear stockpiles so they comply with environmental regulations that protect the area's wildlife. Even after SRS changed priorities, Aiken still stations key figures in national defense. One of the more recent developments includes the South Carolina National Guard Cyber Integration Center, or the CIC, based at the University of South Carolina Aiken. The CIC partnership aims to promote cybersecurity research initiatives, economic expansion, and workforce enhancement centered for Aiken County.

With all the weight Aiken's story carries, it is vital to consider all the tracks, literally and metaphorically, that lead to where we are now in Downtown Aiken. How much of our history can be preserved while also leaving room for economic development? Perhaps today we'll learn from the past to find the answers for tomorrow.

Thank you.