

# William Aiken

By A. BURNET RHETT

**W**ILLIAM AIKEN, after whom the County and City of Aiken, South Carolina, were named, was the son of James and Elizabeth Aiken. He was born in County Antrim, near Belfast, North Ireland, in 1779, a descendant of Scotch people who had settled in Northern Ireland. As a lad of eight he left his family in Ireland and landed at Charleston in 1787. Endowed with the energy, thrift, and business acumen so characteristic of many of the Scotch-Irish, he prospered in his new home and some twelve years later on the occasion of the death of his father sent back to Ireland to bring his mother and the younger children to America. Most of the younger children settled in the Fairfield District of South Carolina. One, he later sent to the North to represent there his cotton business.

Mr. Aiken married Henrietta Wyatt and had one son, William Aiken, Jr., who became Governor of the State in 1844.

William Aiken, Sr., became interested in public life and service as a member of the legislature for several terms from 1824 on. Even before the nullification question, the political factions of the State were dividing into the Union Party and the States Rights Party. Aiken belonged to the Union Party, which he represented in the legislature.

In the meantime his business kept expanding and his private fortune kept increasing until in the late 20's he was regarded as one of the leading cotton merchants and one of the wealthiest men of the city. His residence during this period and up to the time of his death was the building at the southeast corner of King and Ann Streets, now the local headquarters of the Southern Railroad System.

Mr. Aiken's most important public service was his connection with the origin and development of the South Carolina Railroad. A group of men in Charleston with a view to improving transportation and in particular building up the commerce of the City of Charleston became interested in the question of building a railroad. A committee of the Chamber of Commerce, of which William Aiken was a member, made a report in 1827 recommending the establishment of "railroad communication between Charleston and the Town of Hamburg." The report having been approved, an Act was passed by the South Carolina legislature authorizing the formation of a company for this purpose December 19, 1827. The stockholders organized the South Carolina Railroad and Canal Company and at a meeting held May 12th, 1828, William Aiken was elected president—thus becoming the first president of what later became the first unit of the Southern Railroad System. It was estimated that the cost of the road would be \$600,000.00, its length, 140 miles.

The officers and directors of the new enterprise faced a task of immense difficulty. They had to meet and convert a somewhat hostile opinion in the State, this hostility being sometimes personal and sometimes political. They had to raise a very large sum of money, almost entirely in Charleston, then a small community, and they had to make plans

for carrying out a large enterprise in regard to which at that time there was little knowledge or experience. That within a few years the longest railroad then in the world was operated between Charleston and Hamburg, gave evidence of their zeal and ability.

Professor Derrick, in his Centennial History of the South Carolina Railroad, writes as follows: "William Aiken was among the leaders in advocating the railroad. He headed the company from the date of organization until his death, March 5, 1831. His was the task of assembling both men and money to work out and execute the all-important preliminary details and what was of perhaps greater moment to convince the critical public that the project was practicable."

In connection with his position and his duties in organizing the company, William Aiken secured assistance from the United States corps of engineers for the survey of the route. He went to Washington in 1829 with a view to securing a subscription from the United States Government and later had some correspondence on this subject with Daniel Webster, who favored the plan and introduced a resolution into the Senate to that effect. However, the sentiment of the State at large was against Federal appropriations for public improvements and the Government assistance was never received.

The death of William Aiken occurred March 5th, 1831. He had gotten into his gig to take a drive and the horse, becoming frightened and unmanageable, threw him from the gig. The injury from this fall caused his death within a few hours. He is buried in St. Phillip's churchyard.

The following resolution was passed at that time by the board of directors of the South Carolina Railroad Company:

"Resolved that this Board deeply regrets the unexpected and accidental death of its late President, William Aiken, Esquire, by which the public has lost an eminent, loyal citizen, and the railroad, a judicious, intelligent and patriotic president."

An editorial in the *Charleston Mercury* of March 7th, 1831, reads in part as follows:

"Mr. Aiken was among the wealthiest of our citizens and his enterprise and public spirit corresponded to his wealth. He was a man of sound practical understanding, of much goodness of heart, of urbanity of manner, and of liberal and patriotic views. He was one of the original projectors of our railroad and contributed efficiently both of his purse and his influence to promote the success of that important undertaking. He was also a member of the legislature for several years and in that capacity was adjudged useful, judicious and industrious. His death was a very great loss to the railroad company of which he was the president and taken in connection with the importance of that work to the prosperity of our city, may also be justly regarded as a public loss."

where he left one of his carriage horses that had been foundered. The roads and rivers afforded inadequate transportation, especially from the interior, as it required weeks and months for the wealthy inhabitants of the back country to transport their produce and receive in return their supplies.

"Charleston, the metropolis, suffered most, as industry and talent had lost encouragement and met not their merited rewards.

"To remedy this evil, a plan was formed in Charleston to locate a railroad from Charleston to Hamburg. This was a grand project and required knowledge and experience to have devised it. Mr. Alex Black of Charleston in 1827, secured from the legislature a charter for the 'South Carolina Canal and Railroad Company.' He was the mainspring of the company, providing his energy and means during the entire time of its construction.

"This was the first effort in America to build a railroad expressly for locomotive power. The Baltimore & Ohio, begun before the Charleston and Hamburg, was intended for horse power. The work on this road began in January, 1830, and finished in October, 1833. It was then the longest continuous line of railroad in the world, 136 miles, and continued to be the longest until 1840. This was the first railroad to transport United States mail. The construction of this end of the road was under the supervision of a young civil engineer, of Boston, Mass., Alford Andrew Dexter. His uncle, Samuel Dexter, was appointed to the cabinet of John Adams as Secretary of Treasury in 1801, and served for a period the same year with Jefferson. During the preliminary survey of the road, Mr. Dexter, at a point about 15 miles east of this place diverged and went on a straight line through Beech Island to Hamburg. At that time Gov. J. H. Hammond, living in Beech Island, a prosperous planter, knowing the benefits that would follow this great undertaking, used every effort to have this line adopted. So also did Mr. W. W. Williams, living on the other route. Gov. Hammond, afterward United States senator, is responsible for this story of his defeat. The cross-ties of love had become interwoven in these surveys, and the result was Mr. Williams secured the road and Mr. Dexter his bride. He married Sara Williams. In September, 1834, Mr. Dexter laid out the town of Aiken, consisting at the time of twenty-nine blocks, bounded north by Edgefield Avenue; east by Williams Street; south by Railroad Avenue and west by Newberry Street. Other surveyors afterwards added other squares or blocks. In the original map of the town the eastern boundary appears as Williams Street. Efforts in recent years have been made to change this to Williamsburg, the sponsors claiming that this street, like others, was named for the county of that name.

"The roadway was formed by stringers set on posts driven into the ground, with only a strap of iron spiked along one edge of the surface of the stringers. The road originally ran through Park Avenue, the cut was deep enough for trains to run under a bridge that spanned it on Laurens Street, about where the water fountain now stands in front of the post office. One of the feats of engineering was to overcome the fall of 360 feet between this point and Hamburg. A stationary engine was located opposite the present Highland Park Hotel, and by working of cable along the side of the track the engines and cars were hauled and let down to the level of Sand River which was the original roadbed.

"Mr. Dexter moved to Alabama, laid out the city of Montgomery; the principal street of this city, on which the State Capitol is located, was named for him, 'Dexter Avenue.'

"It has been erroneously stated and the belief is today, that, the city of Aiken received its name after the governor of this state, Wm. Aiken. Wm. Aiken was the first president of the South Carolina Canal and Railway Company, and the town was named in honor of him. Blackville was named for Major Alex Black.

"William Aiken, the younger, was elected governor in 1844, ten years after the town was laid out and named. My search reveals the fact that William Moseley was the first settler within the limits of the city. His home stood about 1790, where the blacksmith shop of Schofield's school is now located. His descendants were numerous, and scattered the country over, but some of them lingered around the old homestead and were ever a sturdy, manly race. One of them is the mayor of our city at present.

"The question is often asked, which is the oldest building in the city? The Williams Home Place, fronting South Boundary Avenue and Whiskey Road, stood there ten years before Dexter laid out the town. Around it have clustered romances and stories from the pen of Paul Hayne, Legare and Gouveneur Morris. If too much of the ego appears in this little sketch, forget it and cling to the text."

Thus Aiken will ever endure! Like a beacon light to health and beauty, her natural charms will continue to lure visitors within her gates, and having once seen and enjoyed her virtues, the desire to return is irresistible.

The flowers, too, in Aiken, always remember when to bloom. The year round, the little Snow Drop, the yellow Daffodil, the trailing Arbutus, the modest Violet, the flaming Azalea, the gorgeous Camellia and the *Magnolia grandiflora*, burst forth in turn "like little poems of the earth."

So throughout the year the atmosphere is ever redolent of the aroma of blossoming trees and flowers. In the spring the hills, vine-clad with the sweet yellow jessamine, lend a beautiful and fragrant touch to its floral grandeur.