

## HISTORY

### **Aiken: An Equestrian Tradition Founded on Wealth**

What took place in Aiken, beginning in the 1890s and continuing for about seventy-five years, was a unique phenomenon that brought some of the most wealthy and powerful families in the country here to escape the harsh northern winters, and primarily take part in equestrian activities. Every fall they came by private railcar to play polo and golf, race thoroughbreds, and hunt fox. They held high teas, musicales, balls, and dinners, and every spring the “Winter Colony,” as they were called, migrated north again, leaving behind mansions and traditions that still resonate in Aiken to this very day.

Nowhere else could boast the eminent names, from the highest levels of American society, that came to Aiken. Such wealth and power associated with the names Astor, Whitney, McLean, Harriman, Iselin, Vanderbilt, among numerous others, owned, or leased homes in Aiken every winter season. In addition to prodigious wealth, they all had one additional thing in common, a love for all things equestrian. And the traditions they introduced set the stage for the very essence of what Aiken is today.

This attraction brought foreign royalty to Aiken, including British King Edward VIII, following his abdication, and his wife, Wallis Simpson, Duchess of Windsor. Russian Prince Alexis Obolensky of the Rurik Dynasty came, following his emigration to the U.S. after the Soviet takeover in 1917. Swedish Count and Countess Bernadotte came, following their denied accession to the Swedish throne.

Political giants came to Aiken, such as British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who would lodge at the Willcox Hotel. President William Howard Taft indulged his love of golf by playing at Aiken’s famed Palmetto Golf Club.

Entertainer and columnist Will Rogers came to Aiken to learn polo, and singer, Andy Williams found his true love here. Fred Astaire and Paul Newman would come to visit family members, and Bing Crosby played golf at the Palmetto Golf Club numerous times.

Corporate and industrial leaders also came to Aiken. The Green Boundary Club, built as the winter home called “Sunshine House” for Royal Baking Powder Company president William Zeigler, in 1928, is an example. Also, in 1928, The Green Boundary’s walled neighbor, “The Balcony,” was built for the heir to the F.W. Woolworth fortune. These are only two examples of the corporate wealth that built or leased homes in Aiken each winter.

Today, Aiken possesses over forty polo fields. Its Aiken Horse Show is one of the oldest in the nation, and the annual Blessing of the Hounds, commemorating the start of hunting season, continues as it has for over 100 years. The Aiken

Training Track continues to train young thoroughbreds, a number of whom have gone on to win the Kentucky Derby, The Belmont, and other races of note.

The winter colony's gift to the city of Aiken is immeasurable in its richness of activities and quality of life, and incomparable to almost any other city in the South. Perhaps this is why it has been titled "Best Small Town in the South," by *Southern Living* magazine.

For more information about Aiken's history and winter colony, the following titles are recommended:

*"Stories of the Rich and Famous: Aiken's Winter Colony in the Gilded Age,"* by David M. Tavernier.

*"More Stories of the Rich and Famous: Aiken's Winter Colony in the Gilded Age,"* by David M. Tavernier.

Both books are available through Amazon.com, and BarnesandNoble.com.

#### WINTER COLONY HOMES RESTORED TO ORIGINAL GLORY

Aiken's Winter Colony Historic District is significant as the area in Aiken most closely associated with the Winter Colony and the horse industry. The district contains many of the properties most important in the history of the Winter Colony, including sophisticated residences constructed by Winter Colonists between ca. 1900 and ca. 1930, the Whitney Polo Field, established in 1882, and the Palmetto Golf Course, begun in 1892. Also included is Hitchcock Woods, developed around the turn of the century for riding and fox and drag hunting. Many of the properties in the district are associated with key figures in the development of the Winter Colony. The district consists of approximately thirty-five properties constructed between ca. 1882 and ca. 1948, which includes residences, outbuildings, golf courses, school buildings, and equestrian sporting facilities. The area is characterized by tree-lined streets, unpaved roads, large mansions with outbuildings and expansive lawns and stables. Primary architectural stylistic influences include the Colonial Revival, Classical Revival, and Queen Anne. Listed in the National Register November 27, 1984, The Green Boundary is on the edge of the Horse District.

Visit the link below for information regarding Aiken's historical museum:

[Click Here](#)