A Study of the Aiken-Rhett Stew Stove

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A STUDY OF
THE AIKEN-RHETT STEW STOVE

A Thesis
Presented to
The Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science
Historic Preservation

by
Julia Anne Tew
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Accepted by:
Dr. Carter L. Hudgins, Committee Chair
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ABSTRACT

The stew stove found in the kitchen of the Aiken-Rhett House in Charleston, South Carolina is a rare and well-preserved example of antebellum stew stove technology. This masonry stove was installed in the main kitchen of Governor William Aiken in 1858 and contains six cast iron stew holes and a set kettle. Masonry cook stoves appeared in the United States as early as the mid-eighteenth century. Stoves like this were not an American invention. A French device known as the *potager* is the predecessor and inspiration for such devices. This *potager* eased the cook’s labors in preparing meals and offered more accurate control over cooking temperature. These features enabled the creation of a cuisine unrivaled in delicacy and refinement. French cuisine became the desired choice for the elite society of both Europe and America.

The stew stove in William Aiken’s kitchen has proven to be not only rare but an entirely unique entity. This stove does not represent one particular type of cooking technology. Its design combined elements from the traditional French *potager* with current 1850’s iron cooking technology. The result was a custom cooking stove designed to meet the specific needs of its owner.
DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to Edward and Anne Davis whose love and support made this possible and to Ryan Dun who encouraged me to chase my dreams and stuck with me through it all. It is dedicated to Aunt Morgan who ignited my love of history and fueled my passion for historic houses with countless adventures and enlightening discussions. Finally, it is dedicated to my wonderful parents Paul and Christine Tew who I am so lucky to have in my life.
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A rare type of cooking stove survives in the kitchen building behind the antebellum mansion at 48 Elizabeth Street in Charleston, South Carolina. Governor William Aiken commissioned the stove and by 1858 it was a featured piece in his kitchen. Called a “stew stove” by scholars, this stove is comprised of a large masonry base and cast iron cook top. The influence for this stove came from a French stove called a *potager*. The *potager* was a device that utilized multiple stew holes which provided individual heat sources for each pot or pan. The fuel source was wood or charcoal lit on the grate of each hole. This innovation in cooking technology came into general use in the sixteenth century and was a key factor in the food revolution in France because it gave cooks greater control over their work.

Stoves like William Aiken’s were rare in antebellum America. The stove at the Aiken-Rhett House is the only stew stove that currently remains intact in Charleston. The Aikens’ kitchen building, presently preserved by Historic Charleston Foundation, is one of only a handful of antebellum kitchens remaining in the city. Nearly all of the hundreds of kitchen buildings that were once ubiquitous elements of Charleston’s domestic landscape have either disappeared or been so thoroughly adapted to modern uses that little representing their former function remains. This void created a lack of present knowledge about this cooking stove and its counterparts in America.

William Aiken Jr. was the son of Irish immigrant William Aiken and Henrietta Wyatt. Aiken Sr. emigrated from County Antrim, Ireland and settled in Charleston in
1787 at the age of eight. An ambitious man with good business sense, he gained wealth and esteem as a merchant. In 1801 he married Henrietta Wyatt, a “lady of culture and beauty” and a resident of Charleston.¹ On January 28, 1806 their first and only surviving son, William Aiken Jr., was born in Charleston. At the height of his career, the senior Aiken was named the first president of the South Carolina Canal and Rail Road Company. This was the first rail road in South Carolina and the longest in the United States at the time of its construction. He acquired 48 Elizabeth Street from its builder John Robinson in 1831 but never lived there himself.²

Aiken Jr. was born into privilege. He was educated in private schools and went on to attend the College of South Carolina. After his graduation in 1825, he continued his education with a grand tour of Europe. Upon his return his father gave him land on Jehossee Island. Aiken converted this 3500 acre tract of undeveloped land into a 10,000 acre plantation which boasted over 1500 acres of cultivated rice fields. In 1850 the plantation produced 930,000 pounds of rice and utilized over 800 slaves. Jehossee was “the model of rice production in the antebellum South.”³ Aiken’s income as a planter, paired with his income from the many stores and residences he owned, made him one of the wealthiest men in antebellum South Carolina.⁴

¹ Robert Bentham Simons, Thomas Grange Simons III, His Forebears and Relations (Charleston, SC: Privately Published, 1954), 104.
³ Michael Trinkley, Debi Hacker, and Nicole Sutherland, Archaeological and Historical Investigations of Jehossee Island, Charleston County, South Carolina, Chicora Foundation Research Series 61 (Columbia: Chicora Foundation Inc, 2002), i.
⁴ Mathieson, “Ambition’s Apex,” 25-28; Trinkley, Archaeological and Historical Investigations, 42.
Public service through politics and philanthropic activities were also a significant part of his life. Aiken took a seat the South Carolina House in 1838 and then served in the Senate until 1844 when he was elected Governor of South Carolina. He held that office for two years. After taking his family on a two year tour through Europe, Aiken again returned to politics serving in the United States Congress from 1851 to 1857. After four terms in congress Aiken took his leave from politics. Following the Civil War, he was “not permitted to qualify” to hold political office in Washington. Instead Aiken sat on the Board of Directors of the Peabody Fund. This fund promoted and financed education in South Carolina, a cause Aiken was passionate about. One assessment of Aiken’s many endeavors suggests that “the sweet strength of his career lay in its harmony, its consistency, and its charitableness.”

Documentation of the Aiken’s family life is less thorough. In 1831 he married Harriet Lowndes, a wealthy heiress from an established Charlestonian family. Their first child, Henrietta Aiken, was born July 17, 1836. Though Harriet gave birth to a son a few years later, he did not live past early childhood leaving Henrietta an only child. The couple inherited 48 Elizabeth Street after William Aiken Senior’s death in 1831. In 1833 Aiken decided to make this striking Federal-style house

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mansion his city home. Before occupying the property, he commissioned major
renovations to the entire property. He covered the exterior brick with stucco incised to
mimic stone blocks and added architectural features that transformed the house in the
Greek Revival style. The main entrance shifted from Judith Street to Elizabeth Street.
Interior renovations included adding a grand dining room on the north corner of the
structure and conversion of the two original front rooms into a double parlor. The
intention of the renovation was to create a grand urban plantation for his budding

The kitchen behind 48 Elizabeth Street also went through multiple renovations
and upgrades which coincided with renovations to the main house. In 1833 Aiken
doubled the size of the original kitchen built by John Robinson. The additional space
created in this renovation increased the amount of slave dormitories on the second floor
and the square footage of workspace on the first floor. He also had a stew stove installed
next to the hearth in the main kitchen. This stove was the predecessor to the stove
studied in this thesis. The next renovation in 1858 included the addition of the latest in
domestic technology and interior fashion. The renovation of the stew stove converted it
into the form it currently retains. This kitchen continued to serve the residents of 48
Elizabeth Street until the twentieth century. In the 1950s the present owner, Governor
Aiken's grandson I'on Rhett, constructed a two-story modern kitchen addition which
connected the main house and existing kitchen. With this addition Governor Aiken's
kitchen and stew stove fell out of use entirely.
The kitchen at the Aiken-Rhett House is the last unrestored antebellum kitchen of its type in Charleston. During the twentieth century, all but a few of the city’s kitchen buildings were gutted and refit for modern use. Still more were demolished. A small number were boarded up or abandoned. Kitchen buildings throughout the South suffered similar fates even as the houses they once served were carefully restored. The destruction of antebellum kitchen buildings and the secondary roles assigned them at historic sites is due, some scholars suggest, to dismissive attitudes toward kitchens and domestic culture. Historian John Perry points out the existence of this attitude arguing, “kitchens and related spaces were misunderstood, viewed as unimportant, put to administrative or service use, or shaped into preconceived forms.”⁸ As a result, outbuildings are commonly misinterpreted or ignored in many house museum interpretations. Seen as secondary to the narrative conveyed by the main house, kitchen buildings accordingly receive little attention.

Interest in these under-represented spaces has increased since the 1990s. A movement to re-examine historic kitchens began to emerge. Studies are underway on buildings ignored for decades. Some of these studies are preliminary; others are merely from a fresh perspective. Among the discoveries resulting from this new attention are forgotten stew stoves. For example, investigations began in the 1970s that prompted restoration of both the kitchen and the stew stove at the Hermann-Grimma House in New Orleans. This museum now offers educational cooking demonstrations and classes

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that employ the restored stew stove. In 1994 the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation reconstructed the charcoal burning stew stove once present in the Governor’s Palace kitchen. When, a decade later, curators at Monticello revised the interpretation of Thomas Jefferson’s 1809 kitchen, they reconstructed the eight-hole stew stove that was once the center of his French-inspired kitchen. All three museums include stew stoves to more accurately interpret the life of enslaved cooks and the evolution of cooking technology.

The Aiken-Rhett House possesses even greater potential with the presence of an original stove. Historic Charleston Foundation recognized this when it purchased the house in 1996. The Foundation now manages the most complete set of antebellum buildings in the city as a house museum. The stables, kitchen, and slave quarters all survive. Few house museums in the nation curate as complete a collection of outbuildings. Concerns about the stability of the house and its outbuildings led to a restoration of the exterior of the main house and its piazzas along with extensive exterior repair to the remaining out buildings. The interiors of all the buildings remain largely unaltered in keeping with Historic Charleston Foundation’s conservation plan for the property. The Aiken-Rhett house museum is currently the only house museum in Charleston to apply this conservation approach.

Historic Charleston Foundation’s tours lead visitors through service rooms, into the yard and through the kitchen building and slave quarters. Virtually frozen in time,

10 Ferry, “Food For Thought,” 9.
11 Historic Charleston Foundation purchased the house from the Charleston Museum who had received the house as a donation from Frances Dill Rhett in 1975.
the Aiken-Rhett kitchen provides a rare opportunity for the interpretation of cooking in the antebellum period. William Aiken’s stew stove is an essential part of that story. Visitors walk past the stew stove but there is currently no interpretation or explanation of its use.

Figure 1.2 The Aiken-Rhett Kitchen Building (left) and the Stew Stove inside (right) (Photographed by Author with the Permission of Historic Charleston Foundation)

This thesis is an examination of Governor William Aiken Jr.’s stew stove with the purpose of filling the current gap in information about this artifact. The compilation and analysis of evidence will clarify the stove’s origins, mechanics during the cooking process and the reasons for its unique design in order to reveal the stove’s significance. The results of this analysis fill a current void in the domestic narrative of the Aiken family. Much of the information assembled thus far by the Historic Charleston Foundation exhibits life in the main house; less is known about the utilitarian spaces and the people who occupied them. Studying and documenting this stove presents a unique opportunity to expand the museum’s current understanding.
The second chapter of this thesis addresses the question of the stew stove’s origin. Though early forms of this technology have been in use since antiquity, the stove in Governor Aiken’s kitchen reflects a French influence. Tracing the progression of the stew stove from late medieval Europe to early America revealed its predecessors and sheds new light on its developmental journey to the kitchen of Governor Aiken.

The third chapter explores the Aikens’ installation of the stew stove at 48 Elizabeth Street by examining the renovations and motivations surrounding its installation. Also presented is an explanation and illustration of each phase of renovation to the kitchen building. Analysis of each renovation reveals the motivations that led to the inclusion of the stew stove in the 1858 renovation. The chapter traces the property and the condition of the stew stove up to the present.

The fourth chapter focuses on the artifact itself and offers a full explanation of the design of the stew stove and the science behind its function. Documentation of every piece of the stove through photography and measured drawings conveys this device in its entirety to the reader. Drawings, especially cross sections of the stove, provide information about the stove’s inner workings.

The fifth chapter presents evidence found that is relevant to the cuisine of the stew stove. Bone fragments found in the stew stove are analyzed in combination with other primary source material to explore the dishes prepared on such a stove. This chapter also examines Governor Aiken’s cooks and the training required to run the up-to-date kitchen he created.
The sixth chapter discusses iron cooking stove technology in Charleston in the 1850s. This includes recommended research avenues for further exploration into the existence of additional stew stoves in Charleston.

A wide range of sources bears on this explanation of the Aikens’ stew stove. Much of the analysis that follows summarizes an exhaustive study of the artifact itself. Archaeological surveys of the Aiken’s property, Historic American Building Survey (HABS) reports, and historic structure reports provided initial information about the stove and the kitchen building. Primary source documents such as period cookbooks, diaries, letters, newspapers, directories, probate inventories, and building pattern books provided information essential to understanding the stove’s social and cultural context. Comparison with other stew stoves shown in French publications which detail kitchen technology in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries provided additional information essential to understanding the stove’s pedigree. Secondary sources on colonial and antebellum cooking technology provided context. The review and analysis of all these sources exposed this stew stove as a custom creation born of wealth and culture. The desire for cutting edge technology paired with the emulation of European style drove the installation of the stew stove in the kitchen of 48 Elizabeth Street. These two factors reveal the central significance of the stove. It is a one-of-a-kind design which fused advancements in fuel burning technology with the proven traditional potager configuration to create a custom stove which met the specific culinary needs of Governor Aiken’s household.

CHAPTER 2

ORIGINS OF THE STEW STOVE

The evolution of the cooking device known as the stew stove is extensive and complex. The first appearance of this type of stove is unknown. Its roots extend back for centuries and across multiple cultures and geographic locations. Civilizations as widely dispersed as Italy, Mexico, and China had variations of masonry stoves that utilized smaller fires. The stove in the kitchen of Governor Aiken reflects the evolution of stove technology across three centuries. The masonry stoves found throughout France and England in the past 400 years are the most direct technological ancestors of Aiken’s stove; these two countries greatly influenced American cookery during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The following chapter establishes direct precedent for Aiken’s stove by examining the early stoves of France, England, and America.

The stew stove was the first widely spread deviation from open hearth cooking. This initial stage of development was a masonry structure raised above floor height. It did not replace the hearth, but was an adjacent cooking device that enclosed a smaller fire or embers from the hearth fire on cast iron grates embedded in the masonry structure. The stove’s top was set at waist height, relieving the cook from constant crouching to monitor food. In addition to stew stoves, these stoves were also called ragout stoves, castrol stoves, and in French the potager, potager le feu maconnier, or le fourneau potager. Though known by different names, all are interchangeable and represent the technology that preceded Governor Aiken’s stew stove.
This early form of stew stove, known as the *potager*, originated in France during the sixteenth century. Its name came from the popular French ‘potage’ soup, the most common dish prepared on the stove at that time. A potage was typically a thick soup, stew, or porridge that boiled together any available meat and vegetables with water to a mush like consistency. Over the first half of the seventeenth century this new cooking technology grew in popularity and spread across the country. After 1650, the average French citizen supplemented their traditional hearth with a *potager*.¹

The earliest *potager* was a masonry box topped with stone or tile with one or two voids running vertically through it. These voids, known as stew holes, ran from the top surface to an opening near the floor. Cast iron grates were set within these openings below the cooking surface. Hot embers from the main fireplace placed on the grates provided the heat source for cooking. Most often, the *potager* was located beside the chimney for easy transport of hot embers. Ash from the embers fell to the bottom of the stew hole for easy cleaning out of the front.²

This cooking method was useful in cooking dishes that required consistently

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low temperatures over a long period of time. The cooking vessel rested on a tripod that elevated it above the stew hole to simmer. Since dishes were far easier to move away from the heat source of the stew stove than the hearth, it was much easier to keep food from burning. The height of the stove also significantly eased the strain on a cook’s body when preparing meals, since no crouching was required. The stove stood at waist level, thus allowing the cook to stand at full height during use. The stove stood at waist level, thus allowing the cook to stand at full height during use. The smaller heat source meant specific temperature control for each dish and less direct exposure to the dangers and discomforts of a larger fire for the stove’s user.  

The most thorough account of the eighteenth-century potager is by Charles-Antoine Jombert in volume one of his 1764 publication *Architecture modern ou l-art de bien batir pour toutes sortes de personnes*. This publication describes the stove as no more than two feet nine inches high with a base of brick or quarry stone held together with mortar made from the finest lime and sand and topped with plaster or tile. A strong flat iron bar kept the upper part of the stove from sagging over time.

They are made in the form of arches set on small walls, eight or nine inches thick, which incorporated into the arches of the basement, if any, and otherwise rest on solid ground. These arches span barely two feet and the number of arches depends on the number of potagers to be constructed.

Jombert states that the main flaw with the early version of the potager was the poisonous gas produced as the fuel burned. Despite the device’s typical placement under a window it was otherwise unvented. This hazard was a major reason it faded from use.

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4 Marcel Moussette, “Kitchen Stove or Potager”, *Bulletin of the Association for Preservation Technology*, v 8, no. 1 (2009): 76. In this usage ‘potagers’ refers to the openings, analogous to today’s burners and not the stove in its entirety.
Carbon monoxide and carbon dioxide remained in the room and placement under the window did not successfully mitigate prolonged exposure to these gases.⁵

A more advanced version of this raised masonry stove, also called a potager, appeared simultaneously in the households of elite Frenchmen. The first recorded potager of this type was in the sixteenth-century papal kitchen. It grew in popularity in well-to-do houses after 1570, and became a common kitchen fixture by the mid-seventeenth century. This advanced version of the potager was a rectangular structure of bricks, often faced with tile, built waist high and sufficiently long to accommodate four to six rechaudes, or burners, of different sizes heated by coals or charcoal in the fireproof compartment beneath the cooking surface.⁶

This stove was similar in function to the potager found in less affluent kitchens, but is a larger, more rapidly advanced technology. The latter contained one or two stew holes while the second held up to four times that amount. Another key difference is the fuel source. The more rudimentary version exclusively used embers from an adjacent hearth, while the elite version utilized hearth embers, charcoal or wood as fuel. More numerous burners which each needed their own supply of wood or charcoal meant a great increase in fuel consumption. Stoves this size represented a significant expense to build, fuel, and staff, so were only affordable for the wealthiest of society.⁷

The larger version of the potager, designed to aid in cooking large meals with a variety of dishes, was necessary in an elite lifestyle. According to Jombert, one did not

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⁶ Pinkard, A Revolution in Taste, 110.
⁷ Pinkard, A Revolution in Taste, 110.
have a well-equipped kitchen if his kitchen lacked two separate potagers with at least eight stew holes among them. This abundance of stew holes facilitated the creation of multiple dishes simultaneously. The capabilities of this device made more intricate recipes possible. Constant stirring and observation of cooking vessels was far easier with the stew holes positioned at a waist height. Cooking temperature could be quickly lower by removing saucepans from the heat, offering further control over culinary endeavors. The chance to work standing up, paired with the stove’s less intense heat, let the cook pay closer attention to the finer points of his art. Cuisine became more varied and refined. The impact of these features was significant and was the catalyst for the evolution of fine cuisine. The new features afforded the French cook the ability to focus their attention on the intricacies of each dish in a way those still using hearths could not.⁸

Though the French were the first to make wide spread use of the potager, they were not the only culture to use masonry stoves. In the kitchens of King Henry VIII at Hampton Court, cooks used masonry stoves with “burners” to fry vegetables and simmer sauces. These burners were components of a charcoal stove similar in concept to the potager. The English version had floor level arched opening on its front. The arched opening alternated use either as coal storage or the origin to a burner’s fire pits. Each of these fire pit openings had two square ducts which lead upwards to the stove’s top. These openings were fitted with parallel rows of square wrought-iron fire bars a few inches below the work surface that formed a grate. Burning charcoal placed on these

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bars served as the heat source. The square duct brought a draught from the room up through to the coals which fueled the fire. It also provided a route for the ashes from the fire to exit. Like the potager, this charcoal stove had a more accessible surface to cook on, provided individual heat sources for each cooking vessel and made it easier to control cooking temperatures.\(^9\)

This technology, advanced for sixteenth century England, was the first of its kind and scale to appear in England; however, it was French influenced. The cook in charge of the King’s private kitchen was Frenchman Pero Doux, also referred to as “the Yeomen cook for the king’s mouth.”\(^10\) Cooking technology remained firmly rooted in the hearth for the rest of the country. It was not until the mid-seventeenth century, which saw the return of refugees from France and the Netherlands, that the English were more widely exposed to cooking technologies that varied from the hearth.\(^11\) Huguenots who fled France for England in the 1680s carried new stove technology into the country.\(^12\) The installation of one of the earliest documented stew stoves in England was in 1674 at Ham House, Petersham, Surrey.\(^13\)

By the eighteenth century, this technology was no longer limited to royal households. England’s elite incorporated the stew stove into their houses, as evidenced in pattern books such as Colen Campbell’s *Vitruvius Britannicus. Volume I of Vitruvius*

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\(^9\) Peter C. D Brears, *All the Kings Cooks; The Tudor Kitchens of King Henry VIII at Hampton Court Palace* (London: Souvenir Press, 2011), 76.


\(^11\) In 1660 the Stuarts regained the English crown which allowed many refugees to come return home.

\(^12\) In October of 1685 Louis XIV declared Protestantism illegal with the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, as many as 400,000 Protestants chose to leave France and move to more friendly countries such as Great Britain and the French colonies in the Americas.

*Britannicus* features a design for one stew stove with two stew holes. *Volume II* added another design featuring two stew holes on either side of the fireplace. The occurrence of stew stoves continued to increase and by 1771, *Volume V* featured seven kitchen plans with stew stoves. The stoves typically ranged in size from one to nine stew holes. One of the largest stew stoves was the one at Harewood House in Yorkshire. It contained nine round holes flanked by two rectangular holes.\(^1^4\)

By the end of the eighteenth century a wider range of consumers embraced the stew stove and the convenience it offered. Designs for stew stoves filtered down to the homes of England’s rising middle class. In 1775, Robert Morris’s *Select Architecture* illustrated two kitchens featuring a stew stove, one with two stew holes and the other with five. Timothy Lightoler’s *The Gentleman and Farmer’s Architect* featured three kitchen plans equipped with stew stoves, each containing two stew holes.\(^1^5\)

Another form of the stew stove introduced in the eighteenth century was the castrol stove. Though sparsely documented, the stove is attributed to the Flemish-born, Parisian-trained architect, Francois de Cuvillies. Cuvillies gained his reputation by designing elaborate Rococo interiors for the Bavarian court, but also produced several new designs for the cooking stove. The Castrol stove had a masonry base with several fire holes covered by perforated iron plates. The main difference between this stove and its predecessors is its top. Previously, the only use of iron was in the construction of the stew holes. This new development had a top completely of iron. The Parisian trained

\(^{14}\) Leviner, “The Stew Stove at the Governor’s Palace,” vi.
\(^{15}\) Leviner, “The Stew Stove at the Governor’s Palace,” iv.
Cuvillies likely became familiar with this stove during his time in France. Cuvullies merely used the concept of the *potager* and modified the top. Near the end of the eighteenth century, the design was further modified and pots were hung in the stew holes to improve heat efficiency.16

An important development in the culinary world that influenced the progression of cooking technology was the Rumford kitchen. Benjamin Thompson, an American who history knows as Count Rumford, implemented designs with improved energy efficiency. Rumford’s kitchens are “characterized by large cast iron kettles and cylindrical roasting ovens set in massive brickwork.”17 These kitchens most often found homes in institutional settings or large private estates. Rumford stoves fit into existing fireplaces and each boiler or stew hole had a separate flue that vented right into the existing chimney. Count Rumford designed each installation and customized it to meet the unique needs of his client. His work received a very favorable response due to the undeniable fuel efficiency achieved. Cost was the deterrent to mass appeal, not the success of the design. Architectural investigators speculate that the splays of the Aikens’ own fireplaces in the kitchen building are Rumford inspired.18

When Thompson’s publications made their way to America, his concepts appeared in American pattern books such as *The American Builder’s Companion* by Benjamin Asher. Asher illustrated the installation details and named manufacturers available to

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put this equipment in one’s house.  This technology was available to the Aikens at the
time of their stove’s installation, but is not the inspiration for its design. The stew holes
in the Aikens’ stove are not vented and therefore lack one of the principal characteristics
of a Rumford kitchen.

In the decades leading up to the eighteenth century, the hearth was still the most
common source of heat for cooking in the average American dwelling. As the importance
placed on dining and entertaining grew, so too did the need for improved cooking
technology. America was slower to adopt this cooking technology than Europe. While
most French homes, regardless of class, had some form of the potager, it was unfamiliar to
Americans. For the middle and lower classes in many parts of the country, open hearth
cooking remained the preferred method well into the nineteenth century, Charleston
included.

The adoption of a potager style stove in America began with the elite class. Stew
stoves began to appear in kitchens in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Those
directly connected to Europe and those in political office owned most of them. The
earliest recorded example of an American potager still intact today is in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, at the Wentworth-Coolidge

19 Plate 59 in The American Builder’s Companion contains these building instructions.
Mansion. Governor Wentworth exhibited the common characteristics of a potager owner in America, political leadership and a French connection. He had the stove added to his residence at the advice of his French chef John King. King ran a tavern in Portsmouth and traveled to Wentworth’s residence a few times a week to cook French meals. The governor’s Mansion in Williamsburg, Virginia, is another early example of a potager installation. While its exact date of construction is unknown, it would have been a contemporary of Governor Wentworth’s. Like Wentworth, the last two Royal governors who resided in the palace employed professionally trained European cooks. These “principal cooks” were the highest paid servants in the household. They possessed a level of training and skill unmatched in Virginia, having previously completed apprenticeships in Europe. With this highly refined level of cuisine came a necessity for the proper equipment on which to prepare it. Having the means to do so

The Governor was able to provide these cooks with the best-equipped kitchen in the colony. The governor's cuisine reflected the French influence popular among upper class English society. They demonstrated their social standing by providing a wide variety of meats and sweets at each meal. Virginia’s elite class desired the latest fashion in food, but most could not afford to employ a European cook. Instead, they employed less formally trained slaves who were highly skilled. This continued to be the trend in the South until after the Civil War.

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21 The stew stove there now is a reconstruction. Evidence supporting its existence includes a large inventory of copper pots.
Men such as Thomas Jefferson kept interest in the potager technology alive after the Revolution. During his time as a diplomat in France, he immersed himself in all things French and became a Francophile with a deep love for its cuisine, wines, and revolutionary spirit. It is not certain whether Jefferson was aware of stew stove technology before he embarked on his diplomatic mission in France. He brought his slave, James Hemmings, along to learn the art of French cooking, suggesting it was his intention to bring home a French-trained cook. Upon his return to Virginia, Jefferson installed a potager in his own kitchen to prepare the French cuisine he loved. Jefferson placed an order with Henry Foxall, one of the few men familiar with cast iron stew holes at the time. Jefferson wrote a letter to Foxall in 1809 to request stew holes which read:

The cook which I had in Washington (Mr. Julien) and who is now with me for a time, informs me you made for the President’s kitchen some irons of casting for the stoves or stew-holes in the kitchen, in which the box-part and the grille or bars were all solid together, and that you made them of three sizes. I must ask the favor of you to make eight for me, to wit, two of the largest size and three of the middle and three of the smallest size, and forward them for me to Richmond to the care of Messrs Gibson & Jefferson, forwarding me the bill at the same time. I must pray you to do it without delay, if convenient, as they are indispensable in a kitchen.23

Jefferson’s letter emphasizes the necessity of the stew holes in preparing his desired cuisine. It also revealed Foxall as the manufacturer of the stew holes in the White House. By 1811, when Jefferson’s new kitchen was complete, it included the eight stew

holes requested from Foxall set in a potager. Kitchen equipment and utensils acquired in France finished a kitchen befitting any French-trained chef.²⁴

Jefferson embraced French cuisine, but that was unusual elsewhere in America. For the average citizen who cooked by hearth, elegant French cuisine offended their sensibilities. Hannah Glasse suggested in her cookbook *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy*:

> if gentlemen will have French cooks they must pay for French tricks ... I have heard of a cook that used six pounds of butter to fry twelve eggs;

when everybody knows (that understands cooking) that half a pound is full enough, or more than need be used; but then would not be French. So much is the blind folly of this age that they would rather be imposed on by a French booby, than give encouragement to a good English cook!  

Clearly there was disdain for French cooking; resistance to French cuisine was one of the predominant reasons the potager was not widely adopted. It was still the preference to cook traditional recipes with traditional methods. But even Glasse included a number of French recipes in her recipe book suggesting that French methods were gaining ground.

Jefferson successfully entertained multiple dinner guests almost every night in the White House with the help of his maitre d'hôtel Etienne Lemaire, his chef Honore Julien, and their French style of cuisine. His successors, however, did not attain the same esteem for their French cuisine choices. When Martin Van Buren served a French inspired meal in 1840 with six courses, he was condemned for it. The issue was significant enough to inspire placement of the menu in Congressional Record. He later lost his political campaign to Abraham Lincoln, a man represented as having a simple log cabin lifestyle who dined on corn mush. The portrayal of Van Buren was as a snob who liked to begin his meals with consommé. These sentiments were significant enough to aid in turning a majority of voters against him. Even so, this dinner was yet another example of the inclusion of French cuisine in American culture.

Potager technology is the most direct predecessor to Aiken’s stove. The design of the stove included many of the characteristic features of the potager. Aiken’s stove is clearly of French descent. Like Jefferson, William and Harriet Aiken installed a stew

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25 Hannah Glasse, *The Art of Cookery, Made Plain and Easy: Which Far Exceeds Any Thing of the Kind yet Published* (1774; reprinted Harvard University, 2007), i.
stove after visiting France. The presence of their *potager* style cooking stove reflects the French influence on the Aikens’ culinary and entertaining pursuits.
CHAPTER 3

ARCHITECTURAL AND SOCIAL IMPACT

Governor William Aiken made substantial changes to 48 Elizabeth Street twice during his ownership. Analysis of these architectural changes and their motivations helps to explain the stew stove's form and its presence in his kitchen. Aiken’s motivation for undertaking each major architectural change to his property mirrored the addition of and alterations to the stew stove.

The changes to the kitchen building occurred in four phases which coincided with changes to the main house. For the purpose of this study, the erection date, from roughly 1818 - 1820, is the period of Phase I. Phase II, 1833 to 1835, was the period the property underwent renovation for the first time by Governor Aiken. Phase III coincided with the building's second renovation under Aiken's ownership, 1858 to 1859. Phase IV took place in the late 1950s and marked the end of the original kitchen’s use. Multiple layers of original fabric remain intact due, first, to twentieth century owners’ inability to make changes and, second, the conservation approach applied since the 1970s by Historic Charleston Foundation (HCF) and the Charleston Museum. Retention of this evidence supplies much of the information regarding changes to the kitchen. A historic structures report by Willie Graham, Carl Lounsbury and Orlando Ridout, prepared for HCF, traces the evolution of the kitchen as well as the general development of the Aiken-Rhett property.1

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**PHASE I (1818-1822)**

John Robinson constructed the house and a full complement of service buildings in around the year 1820. The design was typical of high-end rental properties. The kitchen was separate from the main house, a common placement for Charleston kitchens during the antebellum period. A simple and popular kitchen plan accommodated both kitchen and slave quarters by dividing the two-story structure into two rooms split by a central stair. The façade facing the yard had five bays and the back wall had no openings. Typically “separate chimneys, one each for the cook kitchen and the wash kitchen were placed on the back wall of the building, abutting the neighbor’s property.”

The kitchen building is 36’-1” in length and 19’-6” wide, with two rooms of equal size on both floors. The rooms on the first floor functioned as a laundry and a kitchen while the two upstairs served as slave quarters. A central passage enclosing a staircase ran through the center of the building (Figure 3.2). Each first floor room had one door. No doors or windows were installed in the back wall that faced the neighboring property, a typical arrangement for this period. The upper floor was only accessible by an exterior door in the center passage. The kitchen was located on the first floor in the south room closest to the main house. Architectural investigation found no evidence to suggest that any cooking device other than the hearth was present during Phase I.

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2 John Robinson resided next door at 10 Judith Street in an identical property to the original configuration of 48 Elizabeth Street. He built this property next to his own house as an investment property and never resided in it himself.

3 This separation decreased the threat of fire in the main living space as well as the unpleasant noises and smells that often emanated from it. Maurie D McInnis, *The Politics of Taste in Antebellum Charleston* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press Books, 2005), 172.


Removal of almost all of the original hearth in this room occurred during a later phase of the kitchen building.

Next door to the Aiken-Rhett House, at 10 Judith Street, sits the John Robinson House. Commissioned by John Robinson, the two houses had identical floor plans and construction of the two houses took place within a few years of each other. The main houses were identical in plan and 10 Judith Street remains remarkably unchanged. However, the kitchen building of 10 Judith Street did not escape renovation and after years of neglect and disrepair the building underwent a remodel in the late twentieth century. Prior to these renovations, a Historic American Building Survey (HABS) report was completed which included photographs of the building’s interior and exterior. Since the neighboring kitchen houses were originally identical, these
pictures can offer a glimpse of the original configuration of the kitchen at 48 Elizabeth Street (Figure 3.1).  

**Phase II (1833 – 1835)**

John Robinson owned 48 Elizabeth Street for about a decade. In 1831, when he lost the property through a series of financially crippling events, William Aiken Sr. purchased the property. A carriage accident in Charleston killed Aiken Sr. shortly after this acquisition and the property passed to his only son, William Aiken Jr. The younger Aiken decided to make 48 Elizabeth Street his primary residence with his new bride Harriett Lowndes, and began renovating the property in 1833.  

Governor Aiken’s wealth was substantial enough that he could have built a new house. Instead, he chose to put his money into existing architecture. The choice to marry a prominent Charlestonian lady from one of the oldest and most respected families in the state “reconfirm[ed] his commitment to the local social order” and reinforced his footing within Charleston’s elite. Since Aiken was a relative newcomer to Charleston, he was “not connected by the elaborate and multigenerational family ties that bound most of Charleston together.” Aiken focused instead on being an active presence in the high society of Charleston. Governor Aiken was exceedingly conscious of the expected social behavior and the judgments of his peers; he invested in Charleston’s social order

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with a new bride from a prominent family and renovation of a well-situated property in the city.

Aiken created a grand plan for his new property with social ambitions driving the bulk of the renovation. He planned major renovation for the main house, the kitchen building, and the stables. The renovations were extensive and created spaces that reflected his wealth, his desired social status, and his political aspirations. He created an urban mansion designed for lavish entertainment. A renovation of the entryway in the main house also took place to make the house more suitable for extensive entertaining. The main entrance shifted from Judith Street to the west façade, which faced Elizabeth Street. Guests were no longer ushered into an ordinary central passage; instead, the Aikens’ received visitors in elegance with an imported marble staircase trimmed by ornate cast iron railings. Few Charlestonians could afford the Italian marble Aiken had installed. The two front rooms transformed into a double parlor. Large pocket doors that slid open for parties or close for small gatherings were highly fashionable for the period and divided these two rooms. A new dining room added to the east side of the main structure made room for larger diner parties. This dining room looked out over the newly remodeled kitchen building on the north end and adjoined the expanded piazza on the south wall. Aiken successfully created a versatile space for entertaining large groups of people; his new floor plan flowed easily from one entertainment space to the next.¹⁰

¹⁰ Graham, Aiken Rhett House, 10.
Below these grand new rooms were the utilitarian spaces needed to service them. A warming kitchen occupied the space under the new dining room, for example. A staircase provided vertical access and made food service to the dining room more efficient. The warming kitchen also had direct access to the work yard and was in close proximity to the newly renovated kitchen.\(^{11}\)

The kitchen renovations were equally extensive. The building doubled in size with a 36-foot addition to the northern end. The central staircase was removed along with the wall that separated it from the kitchen. The removal created additional space which increased the square footage of the kitchen. The remaining interior wall kept the two original interior rooms separate.

The traffic pattern into and within the enlarged kitchen was significantly altered with the addition of three doors. The first door created an opening in the remaining interior wall that separated the kitchen from the original laundry for ease of movement between the rooms and an exterior door added to the south wall of the kitchen made for easier access to a basement corridor. This corridor contained the stair connecting the new dining room and warming kitchen in the main house. A third door provided interior access to the new stair passage added to the center of the newly enlarged building for access to the slave quarters on the second floor.\(^{12}\)

The first floor of the northern addition was a workroom. This workroom was uncommonly large, perplexing researchers and making its function a subject for debate. Though the room’s use has not been firmly decided, there are several clues. The masonry


ghost of a feature 3’-3” in height is present along the east wall. This feature had a flue that connected to and exhausted from the hearth in the addition. Judging from the fact that it was exhausted, this unknown feature was not a potager, and given that it does not extend above a typical work height, it is unlikely to have been a beehive oven. This masonry ghost most likely represents a set kettle.13

The presence of a set kettle suggests the room was a laundry, a replacement for the previous laundry originally beside the kitchen.14 The original laundry changed to a scullery to supplement the increased needs of the kitchen. Added living quarters on the second floor above the new north section served as slave quarters. The oversized nature of the room suggests a great quantity of dishes and laundry where processed within it. The addition of slave quarters on the second floor displays the need for additional staff to service these new areas.15 Every aspect of this renovation appeared to increase and enhance the mansion’s capability for entertaining.16

Entertainment on a grand scale prompted the installation of the latest cooking technology. Aiken likely chose to equip his kitchen with a potager. This predecessor to the stew stove was on the north side of the kitchen hearth in the space created by the removal of the original stair. Bricks used to create this original stove are still present in the stew stove today. Though the type of stove constructed is not certain, it was most

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13 A set kettle was a copper bowl set in masonry a base with a firebox underneath. Its exhaust system ran to the nearest chimney. The bowl provided a constant source of hot water.
14 Another perspective of the room’s use comes from the HABS survey performed sometime between 1955 and 1959. In it HABS surveyors describe the room’s use as a slave kitchen. It is not clear if this is a theory of the HABS team or recollections they gleaned from Mr. and Mrs. Rhett. The room could plausibly have been all of these things, especially given its size.
15 Even with the enlargement, the kitchen building's plan still reflected traditional kitchen proportions popular at that time which shows Aiken’s careful attention to traditional proportions.
likely a potager and set kettle combination. The flue constructed behind the stove served as a means to exhaust the set kettle. Cooking still took place in the fireplace that remained in this room.

Cuisine was a critical component of entertaining, as dining was an excellent avenue to display one’s wealth. If executed properly, the dining experience was an outlet to gain higher social esteem. Aiken took advantage of cultural trends and technology to create high quality cuisine and dining experiences in his home. In the early nineteenth century, French cuisine was highly fashionable fare in elite circles. Potagers were widely used in France by the end of the first quarter of the nineteenth century and were the only device that provided the conditions needed to successfully prepare the sauces and dishes of the French. So pervasive was the influence of the potager and the cuisine it enabled that food historians suggest that “by Queen Victoria’s coronation in 1837 French cooking methods occupied a place of honor in international royal society, and their tradition of serving meals in a few multi-dish courses” dominated the meals in privileged European households. Charleston’s wealthier household adopted this same mealtime fashion.

Aiken’s exposure to fashionable European culture occurred during his three-year grand tour following his college graduation. The European grand tour was a popular rite of passage and pastime for wealthy Americans. A tradition started by the wealthy Northern Europeans in the eighteenth century, it was adopted by elite Americans in the

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17 A stone hearth that runs the length of the stove and fireplace was also installed at this time.
18 Graham, Aiken Rhett House, 179-184.
nineteenth century. The purpose of this tour was to familiarize Aiken with European manners and helped gain the cultural refinements necessary to distinguish himself among Charleston’s elite.  

21 France was high among the most popular destinations. Anticipated destinations for American tourists included “newly established restaurants, dining clubs, and cafes [which] were serving food of a quality that could only have been experienced in wealthy private households before the [French] revolution.”  

During her investigation into stew stove technology for the reconstruction of the Governor’s Palace stew stove in Williamsburg, Virginia, Betty Crowe Leviner found that economics played a large role in one’s ability to afford a \textit{potager}. Wealth was not the only factor. Another consistent reason is the cultural choice involved in the style of cooking. She found that “one needed to be acquainted with made dishes and how they were prepared. Secondly, an individual had to be taught how to use this alternative to open hearth techniques.”  

A survey she conducted of aristocratic kitchens in eighteenth century, English speaking North America supports this profile. Aiken’s time in France was most likely the time he realized the social potential of adding the \textit{potager}. The Aikens had the means and the cultural background described to install such a device.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{21} According to documents still held by the Charleston museum (Box # 90) he maintained a house or apartment in Rome for part of his life. Though their connection with France is not fully documented, his mother passed away in Paris and in 1950 a French immigrant named Pauline Boudet became governess or lady’s maid to then 12 year old Henrietta Aiken teaching her to speak the language. The Aiken’s traveled to Europe at least twice as a family and French culture seemed to be a great influence on many of their entertaining choices. French clothing, chandeliers, paintings, and other decorative objects were all purchased while abroad. 

\textsuperscript{22} Day, \textit{Cooking in Europe}, 115; McInnis, \textit{The Politics of Taste}, Ch 9. 

\textsuperscript{23} “Made” dishes refers to food such as ragouts, fricassees, and delicate sauces. Betty Crowe Leviner, \textit{The Stew Stove at the Governor’s Palace} (Williamsburg, Virginia, 1994).}
The potager, the large workspace, and the scullery are all indicative of plans for large-scale entertaining. These architectural and technological changes served their intended purpose well. Multiple written accounts detail the impressive events held in these new rooms. One of the most descriptive comes from Fredrika Bremer, a Swedish author, who visited the continent from 1849 to 1850. The Aiken’s house was among the places she visited. Bremer attended one of Aiken’s parties where the guest list included over five hundred people. She wrote of the experience saying, “the entertainment was one of the most beautiful I have been presented at in this country.” Clearly Aiken achieved his desired purpose with his phase II renovations.24

Phase III (1858-1859)

The third major renovation in 1858 followed the Aikens’ return from a lengthy tour of Europe. The family purchased paintings, sculptures, and other decorative objects such as French chandeliers to enhance their home. This influx of new decorative pieces required more space for display and motivated the alterations that distinguished Phase III. A new room that served as an art gallery adjoined the main entry of the mansion. Subtle additions to the room above the dining room converted it into a ballroom. European decorative items such as chandeliers, wallpaper, and fabrics increase the caliber of the décor, which added to the mansion’s prestige.25

New interior decor was not the only addition. Additional installations included the most advanced fittings and systems available. Updates to the interior water delivery system and the outlets that accompanied it, a fully outfitted bathroom, and gas lines in

critical spaces added a modern feel to the house. The Aikens’ joined many of Charleston’s elite in adding a mechanized service bell system. Service bell systems were a popular European practice that came into fashion in America and was another way to flaunt wealth and refinement while simultaneously adding to the ease the family’s everyday life.26

The kitchen also underwent a modernizing upgrade. Modern upgrades to the masonry stove created the device found in the kitchen today. Construction of a new brick base occurred on the right side of the stove. The set kettle experienced a reface with uniform machine made brick to match and incorporate it into the new base. A cast iron cook top capped the brick structure. This new top contained six individual cast iron stew hole. A set kettle feature was included to the left of the stew holes in the cook top. Finally a hood was added above the renovated stove.27

The infill with brick and plaster of the kitchen fireplace completely eliminated the hearth that once sat adjacent to the stew stove. Paint analysis by Susan Buck and the architectural investigations conducted for the historic structure report find 1858 to be the date for this alteration. This significant shift in technology ended open-hearth cooking in the main kitchen.28 The hearth was closed in to accommodate a cast iron stove. Iron stove technology was just starting to emerge as an alternative to hearth cooking. Aiken was an early adopter of this technology as evidenced by the presence of a thimble through which the iron stove was exhausted in the kitchen today. It is the only

26 Graham, Aiken Rhett House, 185.
27 Graham, Aiken Rhett House, 185.
28 The hearth may not have phased out entirely. The room next to the kitchen retains a hearth with a crane that would have been used as a backup hearth or to heat water for the scullery.
remaining clue to the existence of another stove in this kitchen. These two stoves
served the Aikens’ kitchen simultaneously.\footnote{No available evidence hints at the model of stove that was installed. It was removed before the Historic American Building Survey team did their work in the 1950s as it is not listed among the items present in the kitchen at that time.}

\textbf{Phase IV (1955-58)}

An inventory and appraisement of his estate was prepared upon William Aiken Jr.’s death. Among the long list of securities mentioned was one line reading “household and kitchen furniture” which appraised for $1500. The value was not broken down any further, leaving the items that made up this value undetermined. One conclusion drawn from this line item, however, is the value placed on his kitchen. Obviously it was worth noting, as these objects were one of the few tangible items listed. No further receipts or records in the Aiken papers mention the kitchen or its contents after this inventory.\footnote{Graham, Aiken Rhett House, 185.}

Sanborn maps between 1888 and 1902 show a one story addition commissioned during Henrietta Aiken’s ownership that connected the main house to the kitchen. Whether it was a passage to provide covered access from the kitchen to the main house or a modernized addition to the kitchen is unknown. Judging from some of the equipment such as the water heater and the double gas burners dating from 1903 on display in the original kitchen today, it would stand to reason that this kitchen remained in use until at least the early part of the twentieth century. 1902 maps indicate the one-story addition is present. The kitchen building is labeled as servant’s quarters on the Sanborn map and offers no clue to the original kitchen’s use at that time, neither is

\footnote{Probate records for William Aiken Jr., held by the Historic Charleston Foundation, Folder 9 (Elizabeth.048.1.1 – Documents).}
the addition ever labeled on any of the Sanborn maps. An interview with one of Governor Aiken’s great grandchildren, Theodore Maybank, offers further proof that the original kitchen continued to be use. Carol Borchert asked, “Did they (servants) live over the kitchen? Was their old kitchen there? There are two large outbuildings...” Maybank responded: “There was back there, but then they moved the kitchen inside.” Mrs. Maybank, present at the interview, added, “Frances Dill did that.” Although the interview did not reveal any details about the kitchen itself, it does support the theory that the one-story structure of Aiken’s daughter’s time served as nothing more than a passage from the main kitchen. Frances Dill was Aiken’s great granddaughter-in-law and lived on the property with her husband I’on Rhett.

Sanborn maps indicate that the plan of the house remained the same until at least 1955. Between 1955 and 1958, the last major evolution to the property’s kitchen took place in the form of a two-story cinder block addition added during the residency of I’on and Frances. This is the addition Mrs. Maybank refers to in her interview statement. The HABS survey conducted in 1958 stated that “a modern kitchen adjoins the dining room and rear stair hall, to the north.” The demolition of the original hyphen made way for the two-story addition (Figure 3.5). Once this modern kitchen was

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32 Mr. and Mrs. Theodore Maybank, interviewed by Carol Borchert and Elliot Hutson, Charleston, SC, Historic Charleston Foundation Archives, September 26, 2006.
33 I’on is one of Henrietta and AB’s 5 Children. Henrietta passes away in 1918 and the house is divided equally among her children. By the 1950s, I’on buys out his siblings and is the sole owner of the property, residing there with his bride Frances Hinson Dill.
35 The two story addition was later removed by HCF for the health and historic interpretation of the property in 1996.
constructed, kitchen activity moved to the new addition, leaving the original kitchen abandoned and largely ignored.\textsuperscript{36}

The kitchen at 48 Elizabeth Street transformed under the ownership of William Aiken Jr. and his family. Its journey reflected the lifestyle sought and attained in each phase. Phase II reflected a family eager to raise their social standing in Charleston’s elite class by creating a home equipped to conduct impressive entertainment events. The installation of the potager and addition of service rooms and slave dwelling spaces reflects this intention. Phase III reflected the achievement of social goals. The Aikens’ acquired the influence and status they sought. The renovations that occurred during this

\textsuperscript{36} Interviews performed by HCF and informally conducted by the author question the family about it. They all admit that they don’t remember anything about the kitchen. The kitchen was not the domain of the family and they never entered it, even as curious children.
phase kept their residence outfitted with the latest in technological and social trend, as exhibited by the upgraded stew stove, art gallery, and the imported European pieces. The renovations to the kitchen building further represented Governor Aiken’s use of technology and architecture to achieve his family’s desired lifestyle and status.
Phase III Plan circa 1858

- Laundry Fireplace
- Scullery
- Kitchen
- Stew Stove
- Set Kettle
- Date of construction between Phase I and II
- Bricks to close fireplace

Key:
- Phase I circa 1820
- Phase II circa 1833-35
- Date of Construction
- Date of Addition

Scale: 3/16" = 1'-0"
CHAPTER 4

A closer look The Stew Stove

The heart of this analysis is the stove as a working device in Aiken’s kitchen. There is currently very little knowledge on the operation of this device. In this chapter its physical properties are examined and documented in order to understand the way the stove functioned. Every piece is recorded in detail to accurately and completely document this significant artifact. The function of this stove is revealed by comparing the scientific principles of devices today with the physical properties of Aiken’s stove.

Figure 4.1 The Aiken’s Stew Stove (Photographed by author with permission from HCF)
Installed in 1858, the stove has a brick base and cast iron top. The cast iron top has six stew holes set in two rows of three. Five of these holes are circular while the sixth, which holds the front and center position, is rectangular. Conical cast iron cheeks hang from the stovetop in these holes. These cheeks are surrounded by voids which run from the stovetop to the middle of the brick base and open in the front face of the base. To the left of the stew holes is the second feature in the stove, the set kettle. It consists of a cavity in the brick base that holds a rectangular iron grate seven inches from its floor. There is a fifteen inch circular opening in the cast iron top above this grate. A vent for exhausting this feature opens in the back of the void above the grate. It then runs behind the stove and connects to the now visible flue behind the stove. This flue opens into the original cooking hearth’s flue near the ceiling of the first floor. Above, and running the entire length of the stove, is a lath and plaster hood which extends down forty-eight
inches from the first floor ceiling. Each of these elements is documented and discussed in more detail in the following pages.

**The Brick Base**

The masonry base makes up the body of the stove. All the features either rest on or are set in it. The stove in its present form dates to 1858, but the base was constructed in two campaigns. This is evidenced by the two distinct types of bricks used to construct the stove’s base. The first type is the red brick that can be seen across the entire face of the stove. It is a uniform extruded brick that measures seven inches by two inches by three inches. This brick is laid in a running bond across the entire face of the stove. Bricks of this type were not only used for facing the stove but were also used in laying up

![Figure 4.3 Two Brick Campaigns in the Stew Stove](image)
the entire section under the stew holes. The walls of the ash cleanouts and interior brick behind the face are laid in the header position.

The second type of brick is dull brown in color and measures approximately nine inches by three inches by four inches. This type is far less uniform which suggests its handmade origins and earlier fabrication date. The only place this type is found is inside the set kettle. Further examination of the brick surrounding the stove revealed that these larger bricks were also used in the flue behind the stove. According to the historic structure report, this flue was added in the 1833 Phase II renovation. The bricks used to patch the wall in front of the flue are also said to date to the 1830s. This evidence points to the conclusion that the previous stove from Phase II was never fully deconstructed. Instead parts were used in the creation of the newer stew stove.

The three rectangular voids that open in the face of the brick base are known as ash cleanouts or ash dumps (Figure 4.4). These cavities are located directly below the stew holes for the purpose of catching the falling ash produced during the cooking process. There is one ash cleanout below each pair of stew holes. The ash cleanouts provide easy access for the removal of fallen ash and other cooking debris. These
openings were covered by a metal door in some stoves. There is no evidence to suggest this was the case in the Aiken’s stove.

THE STOVE TOP

The cast iron stovetop placed atop the brick base and set in mortar is made up of multiple, removable parts. There are six cast iron stew holes in two rows of three in the cast iron stovetop. Each of these stew holes has a lid.¹

The stew holes are comprised of two parts: a cheek and a grate. The cheek is the body of the stew hole and is conical in shape. The top opening of the cheek has a larger radius than the bottom. The rim of this piece rests on the stovetop and the body hangs in the ash clean out. The grate is located at the bottom of the cheek. Grates are square or circular depending on the design of the cheek into which they fit. There are two types of grates and this stove has both. The first type is a series of horizontal square bars that run the width of the cheek. The second is a series of holes in varying sizes that run in circular patterns (Figure 4.5).

¹ While the double row set up is rare up to this point in time it is not the first. Charles Lasteyrie’s 1824 kitchen design found in Collection de machines, d’instrumens, ustensiles, constructions, appareils, etc. describes one in the early nineteenth century. Charles Lasteyrie, Collection de machines, d’instrumens, ustensiles, constructions, appareils, etc. employés dans l’économie rurale domestique et industrielle: d’après les dessins faits dans diverses parties de l’Europe, Volume 2 (Paris: Chez A. Bertrand, 1824), 81-87.
The grates and cheeks in this stove are separate pieces. The reason for this stems from the grate's constant exposure to direct heat over its entire surface. This extended heat exposure causes the grate to wear out faster than the cheek. Henry Foxall noted this practice in a letter to Thomas Jefferson. Foxall, the maker of Jefferson’s stew holes, included two grates for every cheek when filling his order. He explained that the grates deteriorated faster than the cheeks and were difficult to replace. The difficulty was not in the physical act of replacement, but in refitting and casting a new grate. His practice was to make the grate and cheeks separately for this very reason. This method was still in place in the casting of Aiken’s stew holes.²

Though removal of the stew holes is no longer possible, clues to their separation and how they fit together are still visible. A rim measuring three eighths inches wide and a quarter inch thick encircles the top of each cheek. This rim gives the cheek purchase to hang from the stovetop. Each of the six holes in the body of the stovetop has a three eighths inch deep inset lip that encircles it. The cheek is lowered through its designated

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hole until its rim rests on the lip of the hole, thus suspending it in the brick base. Figure 4.6 shows the iron stovetop with no stew holes and figure 4.8 shows a plan, elevation and section of the stove and illustrates the manner in which the stew holes rest in the stove top and are removed from it.

The iron has suffered significant corrosion so it is no longer possible to safely separate the grates from the cheeks or the cheeks from the stovetop. These components were once removable for cleaning and oiling. Iron required regular treatment. In order to maintain a working stove its pieces were removed regularly to perform this task. Removal made cleaning and oiling significantly easier.
Figure 4.8 Plan, Elevation, and Section view of original stew stove
Figure 4.9 Plan, Section, and Elevation view of the stove in its current state (Drawn by Author)
The final component of the stovetop are the stew hole covers or lids. Each stew hole is fitted with a solid eighth inch thick lid that covers its opening entirely. The lids rest on an inset lip cast into their corresponding cheek so that when set in place they are flush with the surface of the stovetop. There are two types of lids and they are documented later in this chapter.

There are four types of stew holes present in the Aikens’ stove (Figure 4.10). Stew holes A and F are unique while stew holes B and D are the same in size and shape as are C and E.
The most unique of the stew holes is stew hole F, the rectangular one found in the front and center position of the stovetop. The opening of this stew hole measures fourteen inches by nine inches. The lid that covers it is corroded shut making it impossible to view this stew hole from the top or fully document the lid. The grate and cheek can be viewed from the ash cleanout (Figure 4.11).³ The cheek has holes in each of its walls. There are two holes on the longer cheek walls that run parallel to the brick face of the stove. The shorter wall has three holes. Hole placement and dimensions of are pictured in figure 4.13. This grate still holds burnt wood fragments from its last use.

³ Attempts made to lift this lid were unsuccessful. It cannot be removed without causing damage.
Figure 4.13: Side elevation, front elevation, and top view (row one). Center cut sections on stem hole F (all drawn by author).
Figure 4.14 Top view, overall, and grate of stew holes B & D
Figure 4.15 Plan, Section, and Elevation of Sew Holes B and D
The second type of stew hole is found in locations B and D (Figure 4.15). These two stew holes are the smallest. The grate found at the bottom of this type has a design pattern with nine seven eighths inch circular holes. One hole is in the center with eight encircling it. The grate rests on three metal tabs that are evenly distributed around the bottom rim of the cheek. Four one and one half inch diameter holes are cut into the upper wall of the cheek. They are all evenly distributed around the circumference and are located one inch from the top rim.

Stew hole A is the third type. It is similar to the previous two with subtle differences. Stew Hole A is larger with a nine inch interior diameter at the top. The grate has a different pattern with two rings of circles encircling the central hole. The central hole is seven eighths of an inch in diameter. The first ring has eight holes with diameters of three quarter of an inch and the outer ring has eleven holes each with a one inch diameter. This grate also rests on three tabs in the bottom rim of the cheek. The holes in the wall of cheek A are less uniform. There is a ring of six one and a half inch holes that run around the upper wall of the cheek. These holes are space between three inches and three and a quarter inches apart. Three additional smaller one inch diameter holes are below three of the first holes (Figure 4.17).

Stew hole A is the only cheek that sustained significant damage. Its cheek is missing a large segment of the lower part (Figure 4.16). This break in the cheek exposes more of the grate inside. It is the only place in the stove where the edge of a grate is exposed. The grate's rim can be seen more clearly showing the place where the grate rests inside the cheek.
Figure 4.16 Enlarged Grate Edge, View looking down on A Cheek with Break

Figure 4.17 Bottom and top view of stew hole C and E
Figure 4.19 Elevation, section, and Plan of Stew Holes C and E
The fourth and final type of stew hole is found in location C and E. It is eight and three quarter inches in diameter. No grate remains in either location. The presence of the three tabs designed to hold a grate at the bottom of both cheeks suggests that grates were once used in these holes. There are six seven eighths inch diameter holes in the wall of this cheek three quarters of an inch below the top rim.

![Figure 4.20 Lid type for B and D – Bottom and Top](image)

LIDS

There are two types of lids used on the stove. Holes B and D are covered by the first type (Figure 4.20). This lid was designed to be lifted with a removable handle much like an iron stove. The removable handle fits into a small void on the surface of the lid. Once the handle is in place the lid can be lifted without the threat of burns. On the underside of the lid of stew hole B an “08” can clearly be seen along with a circular mark with an indistinguishable center detail (Figure 4.21). These are likely maker’s marks.
The second type of lid is found on stew holes A, C, and E. It has a handle attached in an indented circle in the center. Having a handle of metal suggests that the lid was removed for use as it was dangerous to lift when hot (Figure 4.22).

HOW THE STEW HOLES WORK

These cast iron stew holes represent a more advanced technology than those found in the French *potager* of the late eighteenth century. Aiken was not the first to possess this technology. While rare, stew holes like these did appear in a previous type of stove known as *Le potager d'Harel*. The grate in this earlier example is almost identical.
to stew holes B and D of Aiken’s stove. *Le potager d’Harel* is shown or mentioned in numerous nineteenth century French publications such as *Collection de machines, d’instrumens, ustensiles, constructions, appareils, etc.* by Charles Lasteyrie in 1824 (Figure 2.23).  

This technology continued to appear in print for decades. It is found fifty years later in Audot’s book *La cuisine de la campagne et de la ville* in 1872 (Figure 4.23).  

The stew holes are similar in design to technologies that exist today. The stoves characteristics conclusively points toward the science behind its design. The most important clue is the strategically places holes found in every cheek of the stove. The placement of these holes is very similar to the technology known as the top lit updraft stove (TLU). This would mean that each stew hole acted as its own stove. Though the exact locations of the holes in each cheek vary, their purpose is the same, to move air through the stew hole. These holes work in conjunction with the grate to efficiently burn the stove’s fuel.

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4 Charles Harel published the work that most likely described his ‘*fourneau potager d’Harel*’ in 1806 in *Fourneau-potager économique*, but the only accessible copies located thus far are in France and inaccessible to the author.


6 This explains why authors such as Jean-Robert Pitte refer to stew holes as stoves. Jean-Robert Pitte, *French Gastronomy: The History and Geography of a Passion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 97 – 98.
Gasification is the act of turning a solid into a gas. The Aiken’s stove utilizes gasification through pyrolysis to create the heat source for cooking food. Pyrolysis is the decomposition of organic material due to exposure to elevated temperature without oxygen. The process goes as follows: wood chips or twigs are placed in the stew hole on the grate and lit from the top. The wood is then lit and begins to burn. As the wood reaches temperatures between 390 and 570 degrees Fahrenheit, pyrolysis starts. Once pyrolysis is underway the wood starts to decompose. The decomposition is the release of trapped volatile gases such as hydrogen, tar, and methane. All that remains of the wood after this initial process is carbon. The carbon then descends downward toward the grate. The wood continues to decompose as more of the volatile gas is expelled. In the end all that remains is ash. The ash is useless in the heating process as almost all of its volatile gases are exhausted. In the woods greatly

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7 This conversion of organic material to carbon is known as carbonization. Carbonization is the decomposition of an organic substance through pyrolysis or destructive distillation which causes the substance to turn to carbon.
reduced form it is small enough to fall through the grate (Figure 4.24).  

The heated gases rise and provide the heat for cooking. As these gases rise they meet with one of two ends. The heated gas mixes with oxygen and ignites or it does not meet with oxygen and is released into the air. As air near the ash dump is heated by its close proximity to the stove it becomes less dense and rises. This creates a current of moving air up the ash dump and into the stew hole through the grate. This draught is the stew holes primary source of oxygen. Rising oxygen mixes with the volatile gases produced inside the stew hole and create the potential for flame. When the temperature

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inside the stew hole reaches 750 degrees Fahrenheit the combined gases ignite.⁹

Meanwhile the carbonizing wood, or coal, continues to produce volatile vapors which in turn rise through the stew hole. As they rise further up the stew hole they meet with oxygen from the secondary air source, the holes in the wall of the cheek. A second combustion then takes place. This second burn consumes the methane, soot, and carbon dioxide produced in the primary combustion. This secondary burn results in a more cleanly burning stove. Smaller quantities of harmful gas and soot is allowed to escape as it did in the original potager. Clean charcoal was left in the stew hole as a result of carbonization from the cooking process and could have been reused.¹⁰

In order to best use the heat produced from this process to prepare food, the cook would have placed a trivet over the stew hole (Figure 4.26). The trivet holds the desired pot or pan and allows for more airflow around the cooking vessel. This helps heated air to continue to rise through the stove.

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THE SET KETTLE AND FLUE

The last major feature of this stove sits to the left of the stew holes. A seventeen and a half inch high by eight and a half inch wide cavity in the brick base is the main body of this feature. This opening starts four inches from the floor and extends to the cast iron top. Its depth is eighteen inches. The side walls of this cavity are not strictly vertical but flare out as they approach the cast iron top. A circular hole fifteen inches in diameter in the stovetop is directly above. There is a rectangular grate within that sits seven inches from the bottom of the cavity and runs the depth and width of the feature’s interior.

Figure 4.27 The Set Kettle
Originally this feature had a cast iron door to enclose the fire and grate on the brick face of the stove. This door had two smaller doors that opened to allow access to either the grate or base separately. The museum is still in possession of the top access door, but the bottom one has been lost. “D. LOPEZ/ CHARLESTON” is stamped on the back of door.

One explanation of the name D. LOPEZ is the theory that it refers to David Lopez Jr. a general contractor working in Charleston during the time of the installation. Lopez was a prominent Charlestonian who is responsible for numerous residential and commercial buildings in Charleston. Examples of his work are Institute Hall, the Farmers' & Exchange Bank, Zion Presbyterian Church and Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim. The height of his career was the 1850s and 1860s. This overlaps well with the date the stove was installed. It is possible he cast the stovetop and door for the Aikens’ stove. As a leading builder in Charleston Lopez was familiar with all of the building trades especially iron work. His skill in iron foundry was exhibited when he was called upon to construct new heavy gun carriages at Fort Moultrie. After the start of the Civil War he was appointed South Carolina’s superintendent of state works. This entailed
constructing and running the armory in Greenville, South Carolina.\(^{11}\)

Unlike the stew holes, no other historic example exactly matching the set kettle of the Aikens’ stove was located. Therefore analysis was done to determine that this feature was a set kettle. Comparing the elements that make up this feature with other devices typically found with stew stoves lead to the conclusion that this feature is a set kettle. The circular opening is perfectly situated to hold and heat the large metal bowl of a set kettle. It is also the only vented feature on the stew stove. Set kettles were typically vented for the purposes of airflow as much as smoke ventilation. The flue would “effectively draw heated air and smoke (from wood fueled fire) around the curved bottom of the copper set kettle and ultimately out through the main fireplace chimney.”

continuously heating the water.\(^{12}\) The exhaust flue opening is just above the grate in the back wall of the set kettle. The flue itself is now clearly visible on the wall behind the stove due to extensive plaster and mortar loss (Figure 4.29). It extends from the opening in the set kettle to join the main chimney to the right. Though present evidence lends itself best to the idea of a


set kettle next to the stew holes, it is also possible that the feature doubled as an oven or roaster. Ovens, roasters, and set kettles were all typically vented.

The influence for William Aiken’s stove was the potager. It also included advancements beyond this technology. The influence of the potager can still be seen in its masonry base, lack of exhaust, and use of the cheek and grate stew holes. The cast iron top is a modern addition. French Potagers were typically topped with brick or tile and only utilized cast iron in the construction of grates and cheeks. The addition of holes in the cheeks of the stew holes is suggestive of more recent developments in stove technology. Its cleaner burning individual stoves mitigated the danger of the poisonous gases emitted from the potager.
CHAPTER 5

STEW STOVE COOKING

The Aiken’s food culture is reflected through the stew stove. Cooking techniques changed with the installation of the stew stove and the closing of the hearth in 1858. This shift impacted the way food was prepared and those who prepared it. This chapter will discuss dishes likely prepared on this stew stove, as deduced from clues provided by the examination of the artifact, archaeology previously done in the yard, and publications from the period. Also discussed is the stove’s impact on the cooks that used it.

The examination of the stew stove yielded bone fragments. Three in all were recovered from various locations on the stove. Bone number one was lodged under the top of the cheek of the center rear stew hole. Lodged in the metal grate located below the set kettle opening were bones number two and three. These bones were tested and analyzed by Elizabeth J. Reitz, PhD, of the Georgia Museum of Natural History. Bone number one is a left innominate, or hip, of a cow. Dr. Reitz reported that it represented no cut that she has previously seen. Though gnawed on by small rodents as a result of its extended stay in the unused stove, the bone still had distinguishable saw marks on multiple planes. Bone number two is a second cervical vertebra of a cow. The cervical vertebra is a bone segment on which the cow’s

Figure 5.1 Bone fragment recovered from center rear stew hole (Photographed by author with the permission of HCF)
head turns. The third is an ulna bone from a cow. The ulna is the hinge of the front leg which connects the humerus and radial bones at the hinge joint. Both are sawed on an axis similar to the first, which is to say cuts that do not represent typical butchering.

These bones represent cuts of meat that are not typical for direct consumption by humans. Instead, they signify a different type of culinary use. Boiling bones was a common way to create the base for soups. When a recipe called for a leg or shin of beef, it indicated the presence of an ulna bone. Eliza Leslie, an American author of popular cookbooks during the nineteenth century, details one such recipe called winter soup. She begins the recipe with a description on the treatment of the cut of meat in question. “Have the bone sawed through in several places, and the meat notched or scored down to the bone.” This is done for the purpose of releasing flavor in the boiling process which will follow. This process also offers one explain for the cuts found on bone number three. At the end of the recipe, Leslie emphasizes the importance of picking out every piece of bone from the tureen before serving. This bone could easily have been dropped during the preparation of this or a similar soup. Stew stoves made soup preparation an easier and more refined endeavor. The presence of these cuts of bone indicates the creation of soup and stew on the Aikens’ stove.

An exceedingly popular soup of the period was turtle soup. It was the featured meal in many eating houses around Charleston. The French Coffee House featured the popular dish repeatedly in newspaper advertisements. The Sideboard also features fine green turtle in the form of soup, steak, and fin. This soup was popular among the elite as

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1 Valerie Perry, e-mail message to author, January 22, 2013.
2 Eliza Leslie, Miss Leslie’s New Cookery Book (Philadelphia: T B Peterson and Brothers, 1837), 62.
well. The Aiken family’s cooks prepared turtle often. Archaeological excavations found
turtle remains in the Aikens’ work yard. The occurrence of these remains doubled to
twelve percent of the individual samples during the period of the stew stove’s
installation, 1850 – 1870. This supports a continued affinity for turtle and its increased
preparation on the stew stove. Firsthand accounts of meals recorded by Aiken’s
contemporary Mary Boykin Chesnut offer more support for the strong presence of turtle
in elite society. A meal recorded by Chesnut includes terrapin stew first among her
listed dishes followed by “gumbo, fish, oysters of every shape, [and] game.”

During the period of the stew stove, meat was the center of every meal. It was
featured in all but the dessert course. While meat had been domesticated, wild game
was still a staple in the diet of the household. Archaeological investigations throughout
Charleston show that most wild meat sources yield to a growing taste for domestic
animals as the nineteenth century progresses. This decline did not hold true for many of
the elite households, including the Aikens. Analysis of floral and faunal remains found
on the property during archaeological digs from 1985, 2001, and 2003 reveal the specific
meat choices of the Aiken-Rhett House. The faunal remains from 1830 -1850 reflected a
diverse diet consumed within the household. The remains of chicken, fish, cow, sheep,
caprinae, and pigs were among the most common meats consumed. Limited occurrences
of opossum, beaver, and deer were also recovered. In the period of 1850 – 1870, two-

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3 Mary Boykin Miller Chesnut, A Diary from Dixie (New York: D. Appleton and Company: 1905), 282;
Elizabeth M. May and Elizabeth J. Reitz, Vertebrate Remains from Aiken-Rhett House, 1985-2002 (Athens GA:
University of Georgia, 2003), 5-6.
thirds of the individual specimens were domestic animals such as pig, cow, sheep and goat with the remaining third being fish and turtles.  

Another way to examine the food choices that the Aikens made is to examine recipes, or receipts, they might have used or had access. As Sarah Rutledge pointed out in 1847, however, “it rarely happens that more than one woman in three generations takes pains to collect and arrange receipts; and if her descendants are many, the greater part loses the benefit of her instructions.” This lack of record certainly applies to Governor Aiken’s family. Whether Harriet did not take the time to write down her favorite receipts, they stayed in the mind of the family cook, or some record remains in the procession of the family is unknown.

There is one related source with ties to the Aikens that could contain recipes once prepared in their kitchen. Serena Aiken’s original handwritten recipe book is available in the South Carolina Historical Society. Serena was the daughter of Joseph Daniel Aiken, a close cousin to the governor. He did the architectural design for the new art gallery space added in the 1858 renovation. Since the stove renovation occurred simultaneously with the art gallery, it is plausible that Daniel Aiken may have had some involvement in the stove’s creation.

Serena Aiken recorded a variety of recipes. She lists recipes for minced oysters, scalloped sweet breads, and beef kidney, among others. One recipe found in the book is especially intriguing because it is called Henrietta Pudding. It is most likely a family

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4 May, Vertebrate Remains, 5-6 and 29.
5 Sarah Rutledge, The Carolina Housewife, or, House and Home (Charleston, S.C: W.R. Babcock, 1851), iv.
6 A journal of medicines and recipes such as shrimp pie and a number of cocktail punches once existed in the Aiken Rhett collection at the Charleston Museum, most likely recorded by Henrietta. Though still listed in several of the finding aids, it cannot be found at present.
8 Many of these recipes have been transcribed and can be found in the index.
recipe, as there are no other records for a Henrietta pudding that appear in Charleston cookbooks of the period. The recipe for Henrietta pudding is transcribed as follows:

The Henrietta Pudding
Beat 6 eggs very light _ sift into them a [“unintelligible”] of loaf sugar powdered and a [“unintelligible”] of flour _ with half a grated nutmeg and a (glass?) of Brandy _ beat all together well, add 1 pint of cream; pour into a deep dish and bake it _ when done sift powdered sugar over it.9

COOKS AND THE STEW STOVE

Though the Aikens had a stew stove, there is no evidence to suggest they ever employed a French cook or a free cook of any type. The slaves already in the service of the Governor would therefore have been the ones to use the stove. Whether enslaved or free, the kitchen was the domain of the cook. Since they had one of the most important jobs in the household, cooks had a great deal of responsibility. The menu selection fell to the mistress of the house in a vast majority of plantations, but that is where her involvement often ended. There was a respected social boundary present and the cook, a highly valued slave, had a position of consequence. The slave mistress respected the cook’s authority over her kitchen, as it was an important factor that kept domestic activities running smoothly. A mistress was “dependent on the cook, both for the daily functioning of the house and for the elaborate entertaining that was one of the most important activates that bound together Charleston’s elite society.”10

Trips to the market and the killing and butchering of livestock were among the many duties of the kitchen slave. The Aikens had their staff butcher a majority of the

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family’s meat, as was the trend of the elite during the nineteenth century. The instances of meat purchased from a butcher at Aiken-Rhett were lower than other elite houses, such as Nathaniel Russell, which is indicative of a high reliance on the cook for such tasks. The way the meat had been butchered indicates whether it was purchased from a butcher or harvested from onsite. Saw marks indicate the purchase of meat from an outside source because professional butchers almost exclusively possessed the equipment to achieve such a fine cut.11

For most slaves, the culinary art was one passed down through generations. This did not exactly apply for stew stove cooks. Additional training was required for slave cooks to learn the skills needed to operate a stew stove. Though the stew stove made cooking easier, it increased the knowledge base needed to hold the position. Scattered evidence suggests that a common way to train slave cooks was to send them to one of the eating houses in Charleston. Many of these restaurant owners were free black chefs who operated successful restaurants and boarding houses. Caterers like Eliza Lee, who kept the old Mansion House on Broad Street, provided such training opportunities. “Many well-known cooks were sent by their masters to learn the culinary art from this famous cook.”12 This evidence suggests that, similar to Europe, slave cooks served as apprentices to local ‘masters’ of the art. The informality of the arrangement is likely the reason so few records exist regarding this practice. Mary Boykin Chesnut mentioned this training method in her diary as she recorded another meal. It was prepared by a cook who has been sent to the best eating house in Charleston for training. “Old Mrs.

11 May, Vertebrate Remains, 5-6.
Chesnut’s Romeo was apprenticed at Jones’s. I do not know where Mr. Preston’s got his degree, but he deserves a metal.13 With multiple references in one statement, this training method is stated as though it is a common practice. No record remains to show who trained Aiken’s cooks, but this evidence suggests an apprenticeship in an eating house was the most likely method.14

The identity of the Aikens’ cook is easier to speculate. The cook or cooks were likely Anne Greggs, Dorcas Richardson, and the Richardson daughters.15 Richardson and Greggs were two of the twenty slaves acquired in 1845 when Governor Aiken became the trustee for stock and slaves belonging to his wife.16 In 1846, there were seven adult slaves and six children living at 48 Elizabeth Street, among which were Richardson and Greggs. Richardson’s daughter, Anne Singleton, worked as a cook after the Civil War, most likely having learned her skills from her mother.17

The stew stove enabled the Aikens’ cooks to prepare some of the more refined European dishes. The food described above was the result of a mix of an elite budget and the distinctive flavor of Charleston. As Helen Burke wrote:

> The cooking in Charleston, like the city itself, is like nothing else in the world; it compares favorably with that of France. The Huguenots

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13 Chesnut, A Diary from Dixie, 167.
16 Charleston County, Records of the Register Mesne Conveyance (RMC), Charleston, SC. Deed book R-11, 522.
17 It is interesting to note that in multiple documents William Aiken is represented as a kind and fair slave master. According to slave testimony he was the only one who treated his people well. The names of the cooks employed at Jehossee in 1863 were identified as Ritta, Judy, Minda.
who fled from France and settle in Charleston left a deep impression... in the kitchen and on cooking. Later the negro used her clever mixing spoon in these French recipes so that what you eat in Charleston today is a slowly acquired mixture of French and Negro cooking.\textsuperscript{18}

The Aiken family did not employ French cooks. They relied on their slaves to perform such duties. This gave their cuisine a cultural element that the tables of Europe did not have. The food produced in Charleston had a reputation for its unique excellence. With the aid of the stew stove, the Aikens could have served the finest version of it all.

\textsuperscript{18} Helen Burke, \textit{Foods from the Founding Fathers: Recipes from Five Colonial Seaports} (Fort Lauderdale, FL: Exposition-Phoenix Press Inc, 1978), 213.
CHAPTER 6
ANTEBELLUM COOKING TECHNOLOGY IN CHARLESTON

Cooking technology in Charleston during the years surrounding the installation of Aiken’s stew stove was relatively stagnant. While development continued in the Northeast, traditional hearth cooking methods were still the main cooking methods in Charleston. Charlestonians did not embrace the use of alternative cooking methods before the 1860s. Despite the lack of efficiency, temperature control, danger, difficult maintenance and uncomfortable working conditions of antebellum kitchens, widespread adoption of new technology was slow.

A complex series of causes lead to the delay in development and adoption of new cooking technology in Charleston. Cultural and social boundaries encouraged cooking methods to remain the same. According to Alison Ravetz, “cooks were universally blamed for their antagonism to change.”¹ In Charleston, the cook did not hold all the power. The burden of menu selection, if not food preparation, fell to the mistress of the household. In wealthy households, slaves prepared the meal under the direction of the mistress or head cook. It was not in the interest of the slave or mistress to work out new techniques. An affluent mistress rarely had to cope with the discomforts of food preparation, and so lacked the motivation to improve the cooking devices. Slave cooks were not in the position to change the equipment on which they cooked nor were they inclined to want to change the way cooking had traditionally been done. The motivation for Governor Aiken’s update to his cooking technology was not to improve

on cooking conditions in the kitchen. Instead, it was the social esteem that came with
the ability to prepare fashionable dishes and the quest for the most up to date technology
that drove the change. He was among the small percentage that could afford such
luxuries and did not represent the majority of the population of Charleston. In
households that did not own slaves or employ servants, there was no one to assume the
expense involved in trying new technology. A lack of motivation from those with means
and lack of means in the parties that cooked kept technology stagnant. ²

Inventors were the other group that could effect change in the area of technology.
Interest in change to cooking was slow to come as the field of food preparation was
traditionally a female skill. The field lacked the prestige and respectability required to
gain respect as an inventor. It was not until developments were made by esteemed
philosophic minds like Rumford that wider recognition and exploration began in cook
stove technology. Concerns over rising fuel cost also spurred the need to provide devices
with greater efficiency.³

Population and industry increased dramatically during the first four decades of
the nineteenth century. With the advances gained by the English in the manufacture of
cast iron objects paired with the budding interest in the field a new form of the cooking
stove emerged. The United States became a leading industrial power and its people
were seized by a desire for invention. In the 1830s, over 500 patents were issued for

³ The coal shortage took longer to hit American because of the abundance of resources in the new world. Slowly the more developed cities of America began to feel the shortage that Western Europe was facing.
stoves, but the differences in these devices were so minute they were hardly noticeable.  

It is no surprise the South ignored these new northern designs that did little to revolutionize the cooking field. The changes were so minimal that they triggered jokes from Henry Colman, editor of New Genessee Farmer. He remarked that “it is now a days with stoves … as it is with ladies bonnets. The man who purchases one … must hurry home, or the fashion may change before it can be mounted.”

An observable lull in development occurred during the 1850s. According to the United State Patent Office, there were only 57 patents issued for cooking stoves in the entire decade. This also happened to be the decade that Aiken had his stew stove installed. The following decade jumped dramatically with 258 issued in the 1860s. There is also a clear regional divide in these patents; the vast majority of patents came from the Northeast. A few appear from Tennessee and Louisiana, but not one came from South Carolina.

The first iron cooking stoves were marketed in America about 1830. This coincided with the first renovation of Governor Aiken’s kitchen. Due to the lack of prestige or progress in iron cooking stove technology to that point the option was not a viable one for Aiken. The choice to instead install a stew stove resembling those in use in the trend setting countries of Europe was much more appealing. Iron stoves made no great progress infiltrating Charleston culture or the Aiken’s kitchen during the next three decades either. As evidenced by the thimble found in the wall of Governor Aiken’s kitchen, an iron cooking device was eventually installed. It was not until the third phase

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6 Subject Matter index of Patents vol 3, 1459 – 86.
of renovation to the Aiken-Rhett estate in 1858 that Aiken warranted its inclusion in the kitchen. This addition showed that iron stove technology was finally starting to be worth its expense. Aiken did not shift entirely to iron stove technology at this time. The reconstruction of a more modern stew stove displays Aiken’s need for a traditionally inspired yet modernized cooking device. There may have been a few of his contemporaries experimenting with this technology as well, but at this time they were in the minority. These early stoves were big cumbersome things that needed a great deal of maintenance to function properly. Many consumers believed they caused health problems in those regularly exposed to them. The technology still had a long way to go and did not gain any kind of wide spread adoption until the 1870s and 80s. Those who purchase a new cooking stove knew it may be outdated within the year. Unlike the stew stove, it did not have yet have a long legacy of proven success.7

There is no evidence to suggest the type of iron cook stove once housed in Aiken’s kitchen. There is no recollection of its existence in recent memory, or the time of its removal from the house. The search for models popular in Charleston at that time also yielded no result. In newspapers available from the late 1850s, there is a clear lack of stove technology advertised in Charleston. If stoves sold, it was not with the aid of marketing in the local newspapers. A thorough examination of The Charleston Mercury and the Charleston Daily Courier from the late 1850s to 1860s produced no advertisement for cooking stoves. This is not due to a lack of technology present in the city. Numerous ads showing the latest in sewing machines, coffee and ice cream makers,

7 Brewer, From Fireplace to Cookstove, 64 – 67.
biscuit and cracker machines, self-sealing can and jars, and even steam engines throughout the latter part of the 1850s. A variety of foods and beverages were available for purchase throughout the city. Items as common as rice, flour, and corn as well as imported Italian maccaroni, English cheese, and French green peas were readily available. In contrast there are few merchant selling the cooking devices needed to prepare these food supplies. The Charleston City Directory of 1852 shows only one stove dealer, ADAMS WS Bricklayer and Stove Dealer, located at 34 Broad St. In 1856, this vendor moved to 18 Broad Street and sold goods as ADAMS W.S. stove and grate store. A transition took place during this period causing bricklayer to drop from his title. This exclusion could signal the increase in iron stove sales and a decrease in masonry. It is important to note that “stove” could refer to either a cooking or heating device. Not until 1859 when Adams again changes his name, this time to ADAMS W. S. Stove and Range warehouse that definitive evidence for the marketing of cooking equipment appears. Adding the word “range” signifies the presence of cooking equipment. Competition also begins to appear; four stove and range vendors fill out the category in the 1860 city director (Figure 6.1).8

EVIDENCE FOR STEW STOVES IN CHARLESTON

The lack of antebellum stoves in Charleston and the Southeastern United States suggests that the Aikens’ stew stove was rare. Present physical evidence alone cannot

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8 Charleston City Directory, 1852, Charleston County Public Library, Charleston, SC; Charleston City Directory, 1856, Charleston County Public Library, Charleston, SC; Charleston City Directory, 1859, Charleston County Public Library, Charleston, SC.
make this argument conclusively. Most of the kitchens, both residential and
corporal, that could have rivaled it were removed in order to make room for
constantly evolving kitchen technology. There are other ways to determine the possible
existence of stew stoves in Charleston for the purpose of further comparison of
Charleston’s existing cooking technology during the antebellum period.

A variety of evidence points to the existence of stew stoves. Inventories are
useful sources in determining the former existence of a demolished stew stove. If an
inventory contains a large amount of copper cookware, it is likely that the kitchen once
employed a stew stove. Copper was the most popular metal used for stew stove
cookware because of its lightweight and efficiency in heat conduction. It was also rare
in American kitchens because of its expense and the rigorous maintenance need. For
these reasons copper cookware, as with the stew stove, is found in great quantities only
in the households of the incredibly wealthy.⁹ Architectural investigation of antebellum
kitchen buildings can provide evidence. Ghost marks of demolished masonry structures
that terminate at waist height indicate the past existence of a stew stove. Historic
drawings of floor plans, when available, can be the most revealing.

Evidence for stew stoves other than Aiken’s does exist in Charleston. According
to stew stove researcher Betty Crowe Leviner, there are at least three properties with
evidence to support the fact that they once housed stew stoves. These locations are the
Miles Brewton House, the Heyward Washington House, and 34 Meeting Street. A
room-by-room inventory of 34 Meeting Street, taken in 1777, includes an extensive

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amount of copper cookware in the kitchen. Recently a plan of the Nathaniel Russell House from the 1870s, uncovered by the museum, shows a possible fourth stew stove. This plan shows a stove with qualities similar to Aiken’s stove. It features both square and round stew holes and what may be a cast iron top surrounding the round holes in the center (Figure 6.2). Though an in-depth study of stew stoves in Charleston is beyond the scope of this thesis, these four properties are the most viable place to start for further investigation of this topic.

Charleston is a city entrenched in tradition. Ways of life, especially those as deeply rooted as cooking traditions, are not altered easily. Though some development took place in iron stove technology, it did not catch on in Charleston during the decade Aiken installed his stew stove. Tradition is a strong guiding force for culture in Charleston. Cooking methods perfected over generations were displaced with great difficulty. Governor Aiken did not have a great selection from which to choose when he decided to undertake his technological upgrades in 1858. It is no surprise then that he turned to an updated version of a prestigious and traditional European cooking
device rather than rely solely on the rotating technology that characterized iron cook stoves.
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

Governor Aiken’s stew stove is noteworthy as perhaps the only original stove with an iron cook top and masonry base in America today. However, the stove’s uniqueness alone does not explain its significance. This study revealed its origins, the motivations behind its installation, its design and function, and the stove’s impact on its environment. All these factors come together to define the importance of this particular stew stove.

The origins of the stove were determined to be French. Discovering the French roots of the stew stove was the first link in revealing a central theme of the stove’s significance. The stove’s design did draw influence from the potager. Its very essence was that of the progressive French cooking device. After comparison to many varieties of the potager, it also becomes clear that Aiken’s stove took influence from more than just tradition. The stew stove in question contained more advanced technology than that found in a typical potager. The hole pattern found in the cheeks of the stew holes set the Aikens’ stove apart from more traditional cooking devices. This element suggests a cooking method as akin to modern technology as it is to the potager. The holes utilized a cleaner and more efficient heating method. While Governor Aiken’s stove is similar to a traditional cooking device, it is also at the cusp of developing iron cooking technology.

The cultural influence of the French was a motivating factor in driving Governor Aiken to install the stew stove in his kitchen. The consumerism fueled drive that prompted the highest echelon of society to constantly obtain the newest and most
fashionable products was also an influential factor. The stove was part of the effort to
gain and maintain an elite social status. The Aikens’ choice in a cooking device in the
style of those used by the finest French cooks met this end. It was a unique marvel even
in its own day and became a factor in their successful achievement of elite status.

If it is then a separate technology, especially one that burned so efficiently, why
did it disappear from kitchens? The main reason was the stove’s custom format and
exclusivity. The design of Aiken’s stew stove links components from the potager and new
iron cooking technology. The aspects incorporated in the stove’s unique design are proof
of its custom nature. Aiken’s stove was not a mass produced piece of equipment. Mixing
high European fashion with developing modernizations points to a device designed to
meet Aiken’s specific needs as part of the wealthy elite. There are numerous benefits to
this custom stove. An abundance of individual clean burning stew holes made his
kitchen safer. They also equipped the kitchen staff with the ability to prepare the
quantity and quality of cuisine desired to feed his family and numerous guests. The
combination of an entire cook top of cast iron and a masonry base is additionally rare.
This stove uses traditional technology to support developing technology. The masonry
base meets the airflow, cleaning, and support needs of the iron cook top. This stove,
however, was appropriate for a lifestyle most never even dreamt of achieving, and
therefore was not sought after by the general public. This device contains more burners
than the average stove used today. Its size, paired with its incorporation of a form of
stove never popular in America, made it unappealing to the mass consumer. By the time
iron stove technology progressed enough to be useful, it had surpassed Aiken’s technology and become an entity all its own.

CONTINUING MYSTERIES

Though artifacts like remaining bone fragments have been uncovered in the examination of this stove, lingering mysteries remain. Underneath the unmoving cover of stew hole F lies a pile of clues waiting to be examined. Gaining access to the interior of this stew hole was not possible because the top is corroded shut. The holes in the cheeks provide an intriguing, though somewhat hazy, look at the contents, as does the view from the underside of the grate. Inside and sitting above the ashes lay scraps of paper which retain print (Figure 7.1). No words are decipherable from the current view, but removal and examination of these pages could contain valuable information. If they are newspaper fragments that still hold dates on their pages, it could reveal the date of the stove’s last use. The content of the paper may be additional documentation of the Aikens' time. Stew hole F certainly warrants further examination.

PRESERVING THE STEW STOVE AND ITS LEGACY

This stew stove has survived the test of time thus far and remains largely intact. Nonetheless, the stove has experienced some damage and degradation. Severe mortar loss has taken place throughout the brick base and the flue behind the stove. A great
majority of the mortar near the top of the brick base has turned to dust, compromising the structural integrity as bricks loosen and fall out. Water continues to penetrate the kitchen building and leak down the wall; this infiltration heightens the risk of loss. Constant exposure to moving water is a main contributor to mortar erosion. If action continues to be deferred the brick base will fall apart. The best option for mitigation is the removal of the constant water flow. This is difficult because the stove sits in a deteriorating building, making complete prevention of water infiltration an extensive task. Repointing the stove is another gentle option, as long as the mortar used matches the original in character and composition. This will not stop the problem alone, but act to delay loss. The core problem is water infiltration.

This constant exposure to water causes another problem for the stove. Since the stovetop and stew holes are cast iron, they are subject to a chemical process known as corrosion. Corrosion occurs when iron reacts with water, oxygen, or other environmental substances, such as salt. The cast iron begins to revert back to its stable mineral state. This process initiates at a relative humidity of 65%. If other factors such as salt or air pollution are present, this process can begin at a lower humidity. The stove is located in Charleston, a coastal town, meaning exposure to both humidity and salt sea air is constant. Corrosion’s expansive nature will eventually affect the stovetop’s integrity and increase the deterioration of the surrounding brick. Corrosion currently covers all iron components of the stove.¹

The first step in finding the correct mitigation of corrosion is to consult an expert who can identify its nature and extent. Treatment options include sandblasting, application of a silicate-based corrosion inhibitor, or acid-pickling followed up with electroplating or hot dipping. Sandblasting can be effective in removing corrosion but the stew stove’s iron components are not very thick. Over blasting or incorrect blasting can result in serious damage. The application of any coating not original to the stove will compromise its historic integrity. Acid pickling can be very harsh, opening the door for further damage. Electroplating protects the metal, but adds a layer of material not originally found on the stove. Careful consideration of the possible damage of each mitigation option is required.  

Other evidence continues to be lost in the debris of erosion. A thorough sifting and cataloguing of artifacts remaining in the ash dumps would be a beneficial exercise. The bones recovered during this investigation were simply laying on the surface. Additional artifact removal from the stove would provide an avenue for further study and preservation.  

Historic Charleston Foundation, already a good steward of this property, takes a continued interest in the out buildings and what they can reveal about the Aikens’ household. The discovery and testing of bone and unidentified debris in the sealed stew hole have intrigued the museum’s staff. The bone analysis brought together many people who are in a position to further analyze this stove. With the new information this thesis

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2 Weaver, *Conserving Buildings*, 175-189.
provides, a more meaningful interpretation of the kitchen can be created for the museum’s display.

Ultimately, the mitigation decision comes down to Historic Charleston Foundation’s conservation plan. The current plan is one of preservation which does not include restoration of the interiors of the buildings. An artifact this rare could easily fade into oblivion, but the hope is that this study will spark further investigations of this kitchen and others like it. William Aiken’s stove is a significant piece of Charleston’s cultural heritage, yet elements of this stove remain undiscovered. This thesis is a case study of obscure antebellum cooking devices but can also serve as a catalyst for further study of stew stove technology and domestic life inside the Aiken-Rhett Mansion.
APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

TRANSCRIBED OF MRS. SERENA DANIEL AIKEN SIMONS RECIPES

Recipe Book, c. 1860-1880 34/720 SCHS

Front Inscription: “Mrs. L Grange Simons, Charleston SC -1880

Her recipes included:

- Sweet Wafers
- Sherbet
- Lemon Pudding
- [Prepared] Shrimps
- Loaf [Rice]
- Jimmey Cake
- Rice Cake with Buck wheat
- Rice Griddle Cakes
- Arrow Root Jelly
- Confederate Cake
- Tapioca Pudding
- The Henrietta Pudding

  Beat 6 eggs very light _ sift into them a ?? of loaf sugar powdered and a ? of flour _
  with half a grated nutmeg and a (glass?) of Brandy _ beat all together well, add 1
  pint of cream; pour into a deep dish and bake it _ when done sift powdered sugar
  over it.
- Baked Pudding
- Pudding Sauce

  Six heaped table spoons of loaf sugar, half a LB of butter to a cream _ then add 1 egg
  _ 1 muge of wine & 1 nutmeg _ when it is well mixed sit it on the fire until it comes to
  a boil, it is then fit for cake?.
- [Claud or claner] Beef
- Plum Pudding
- Ginger Cake
- Pudding Sauce
- [Italian] Cream
- Soft Gingerbread
- Yeast Cake (Crossed out / slashed over)
- Yeast Cakes (next pages full recipe)
- Soda Balls
- Bush ???
- Batter Pudding
- Virginia Bread
- Sally Su????
- Charlotte [Russe]
- To Pickle Peppers
- An English Plum Pudding
- To Pickle Peppers
- Soft Ginger Cake
- [Sihw] Cake
- Egg Pudding
- Delicious dish of Apples
- Rice Mush for a Dessert
- (?w)eggs for Tea
- A???age Pudding
- Blackberry Wine
- Blackberry Wine
  [W Pickens] Receipts
- A [crumple] fruit cake
- [Lemon] Pudding
- Ginger ????gs
- Almond Pudding (very rich)
- Sponge Gingerbread
- L??? – Potato Pudding
- Aunt Charlotte’s Rice Flour Bread
- Sally [Luma]
- Sponge Cake
- White Mountain Cake
- Marmalade
- Beef Tea
- Caramells from Mrs. Rutledge
- Almond Cake
- Chocolate icing for cake
  
  *From Mrs. Rutledge*
- A Small Sponge Cake
  
  *From Mrs. Hall*
- Meringue
- S??m Cream
- Strawberry Preserve
- Cream Cake
- ???den Cake
- Sweet? Cream
- Orange Ju?le?
- Illegible recipes

**Minced Oysters**

About 3 dozen oysters will fill 1 dozen shells. Chop oysters thoroughly, mince an onion very fine and add to the oysters; also add cayenne pepper, salt and a little nutmeg, ¼ teaspoon lemon juice, the raw yolk of 2 eggs, and a large table spoon butter; use as much toasted bread crumbs as oysters. Put all on the fire and cook a little, then fill the shell, after which sprinkle with bread crumbs, and bake about ½ hour.

- Beef Kidney
Cut the Kidney into thin slices, flour them and fry to a nice brown. When done, make a gravy in the pan by pouring away the fat, outing in a small piece of butter, ¼ pint boiling water, pepper and salt and a tablespoon of mushroom catsup. Let the gravy just boil up, pour over the kidney and serve.

A nice way to serve cold beef
Cut cold roast beef in slices, put gravy enough to cover them and a wine glass full of catsup or wine or a lemon sliced thin, if you have not gravy, put hot water and a good bit of butter, with a teaspoon or more of browned flour, put it in a closely covered slew pan, and let it simmer gently for ½ hour. If you choose, when the meat is done, cut a leek on thin slices and chop a bunch of parsley small, and add it; serve boiled or mashed potatoes with it. This is equal to beef-a-la-mode. Or cold beef may be served cut in neat slices, garnished with sprigs of parsley and made mustard & tomato catsup in the (caster?) serve mashed of not new potatoes with it and ripe fruit or pie or both for dessert for a small family dinner

- Scalloped Sweet-Breads
- Curry of Eggs
- Other recipes in folder were:
- For Preserving half limes and For Making lime syrup
- Cornbread
- Tomato catsup
- Pickles
APPENDIX B

ADDITIONAL STEW STOVE PICTURES
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<th>Stew Hole B</th>
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<td>Stew Hole F</td>
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Set Kettle/ Oven/ Roaster
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<td><strong>Bone Recovered from Stew Hole C</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Thimble for the Iron Stove</strong></td>
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<td>Water Heater</td>
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