

Not just HOMETOWN PRIDE: AIKEN HORSING AROUND

Aiken thrives in its 175th year

BY MARC RAPPORT

WHEN HOLLYWOOD hooper Fred Astaire would retrieve his mail at the Aiken post office, he would dance up and down the stairs, to the gathered crowd's delight.



Aiken's lobster race has become an annual spring rite. Find out more about this year's race in our Highlights on page 6.

While perhaps a bit apocryphal, the story speaks to the spirit of Aiken, a long-time haven for well-heeled horses and horse owners alike, thoroughbred champions and captains of industry who made the little South Carolina town their home away from home.

Founded 175 years ago as a rail town, Aiken quickly became a retreat

for Charleston families that could afford to flee the heat and malaria of Lowcountry summers.

That was followed around the turn of the last century by the Winter Colony—wealthy northerners who brought their love of horses, polo and big second homes—called “cottages.”

And then came the Cold War and the creation of the Savannah River Plant, a nuclear weapons facility that employed thousands of engineers, scientists and technicians who added their own flavor to the gracious mix of old South and old money already holding sway.

The result was a community of unusual verve and liveliness that thrives to this day.

It has a bustling downtown full of cafes and shops and cultural opportunities ranging from community theater to the Juilliard School and recreational and educational offerings usually found in much larger cities. All in a small-town atmosphere the town and its people value and work hard to keep.

“Aiken is the kind of place where you can see someone with a billion-dollar company and million-dollar horses sitting next to the owner of a small retail business, a farmhand and a college student, and everyone's just relaxed and having a good time,” said Robbie Bellamy, Aiken County tourism coordinator.

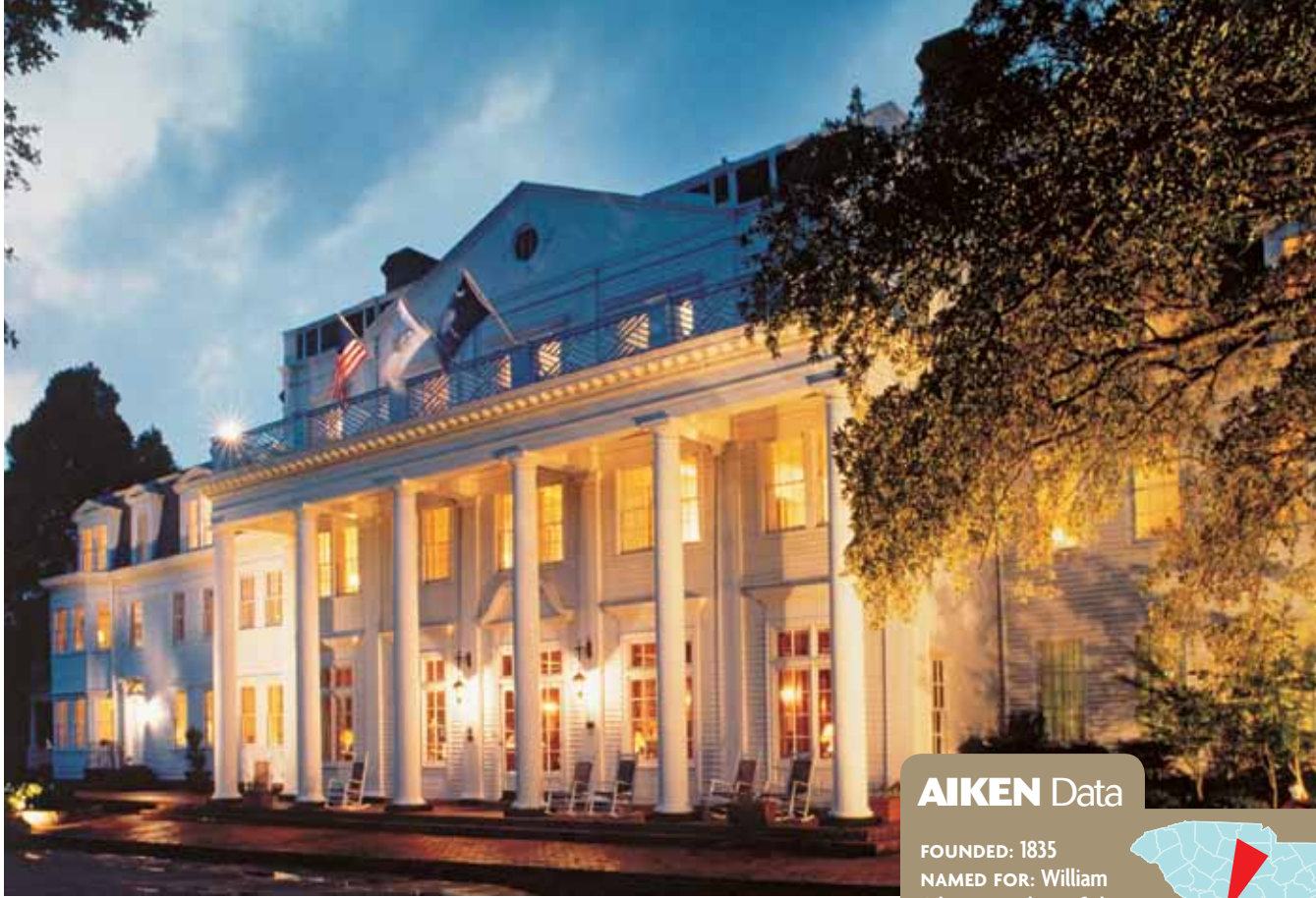
“And just to look around, I think we're like a mini-Charleston. Not as large or quite as old but with that beautiful, historic look and gracious feel,” she said.

The stars come out

And the town has plenty of stories.

“Fred Astaire used to come stay with an aunt and uncle here and work on his dance routines. They say crowds used to gather by the old post office to watch him dance up and down the stairs to get his mail,” said Elliott Levy, executive director of the Aiken County Historical Museum.

“I don't know if that part of the story is true, but it sure sounds like Aiken,” Levy said. “Bing Crosby came here to play golf. The best polo player ever to play the game also lived here, a



man who was the model for F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. That's the kind of place this was, and still is."

It's also the kind of place where people leave, see the world and come on back to stay.

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—GEOFF ELLIS

raise our daughter, and that's why so many retirees are coming here, too," said Geoff Ellis.

Ellis spent much of his childhood at a relative's horse farm in Aiken before building a career as an international restaurateur. He moved back from New Zealand with his daughter Grace, now 5, and his wife, Shannon. They

The Willcox was built at the turn of the 20th century to accommodate Aiken's wealthy visitors, who came to ride and hunt. It's said that President Franklin Roosevelt would take his private train car to the hotel's back door and quietly slip in.

AIKEN Data

FOUNDED: 1835
 NAMED FOR: William Aiken, president of the S.C. Canal & Railroad Co.
 SIZE: 17.93 square miles
 POPULATION: 29,434
 MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME: \$49,484
 LOCAL CO-OP: Aiken Electric Cooperative

now own one of Aiken's signature properties, The Willcox Inn, where they also have opened a gastropub, a tavern with high-quality restaurant food and a concept birthed in the United Kingdom about 20 years ago, Ellis said.

In addition to fine and casual dining, there's a rich mix of cultural attractions and diversions and educational institutions—anchored by the University of South Carolina-Aiken and Aiken Technical College—and a surprising number of theaters and galleries.

New to the scene, the world-renowned Juilliard School is now staging residence and performance programs, based at Joye Cottage, a 60-room mansion whose owners paved the way for the New York City institution to come here.

"There's really a huge climate for cultural events here, along with remarkable public spaces such as Hopelands Gardens and Hitchcock Woods, a public park larger than Central Park," said Mary Ann Keisler, director of the Thoroughbred Country regional tourism organization.

The gentleman's game of golf has a long history here, just across the river from perhaps that most famous layout of all—Augusta National.

AIKEN Directory

GETTING THERE

Aiken is in Aiken County, bisected by U.S. 1 and U.S. 78 and just off Interstate 20. It is about 50 miles from Columbia and 15 miles from Augusta, Ga.



Revived in the 1990s, downtown Aiken is alive with shops, restaurants and galleries.

INFORMATION CENTRAL

A good place to begin the exploration is the new **AIKEN COUNTY VISITOR CENTER** 113 Laurens St. • (803) 642-7557 •

tourism@aikencountysc.gov • aikencountysc.gov/tourism.

MUSEUMS/TOURS

Take a guided tour of the **WINTER COLONY AND HISTORIC DISTRICT** Saturdays at 10 a.m., 124 Newberry St. • (803) 641-7631 for reservations • aiken.net. Check out one of the only Winter Colony mansions open to the public, now the **AIKEN COUNTY HISTORICAL MUSEUM** 433 Newberry St. • (803) 642-2015 • aikencounty.net. Learn the equestrian story at the **THOROUGHbred RACING HALL OF FAME AND MUSEUM** 135 Dupree Place • (803) 642-7630. Get starry-eyed at the state-of-the-art **DUPONT PLANETARIUM** at USC-Aiken, 471 University Parkway • (803) 641-3654 • usca.edu.

GARDENS/PARKS

It's hard to miss **HITCHCOCK WOODS**, considered the largest urban forest in the U.S., covering 2,100 acres with 65 miles of walking and riding trails. Enter at *South Boundary* or *Dibble Road* • (803) 642-0528 • hitchcockwoods.com. **HOPELANDS GARDENS** is a 14-acre estate that features year-round serene beauty, Christmas decorations and a summer concert series, *Whiskey Road and Dupree Place* • (803) 642-7631 • aiken.net/hopelandsgardens.html. A natural wonder right in town is **CAROLINA BAY PARK**, centering on one of those Carolina bays, water-filled depressions of mysterious origin

found along the Atlantic Coastal Plain and in this case, off *Price Avenue* • (803) 642-7630 • aiken.net.

PERFORMING/CULTURAL ARTS

While the "Juilliard in Aiken" series (juilliardinaiken.com) is becoming a spring favorite, year-round offerings have graced the Aiken calendar for years. Venues include the regular gallery exhibits at the **AIKEN CENTER FOR THE ARTS** 122 Laurens St. SW • (803) 641-9094 • aikencentreforthearts.org, and the home of the Aiken Community Playhouse, the **WASHINGTON CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS** 124 Newberry St. • (803) 648-1438 • aikencommunityplayhouse.com. USC-Aiken also offers a couple of strong venues of its own, including the **USCA CONVOCATION CENTER** • (803) 643-6900 • uscatix.com • and the art gallery and stage theaters at the **ETHERREDGE CENTER** • (803) 641-3305 • usca.edu/ec.

DINING/ACCOMMODATIONS

Highlights include historic, gracious old **THE WILLCOX INN** and its new restaurant 100 Colleton Ave. • (803) 648-1898 • thewillcox.com. Locals and visitors alike are quick to point out upscale **MALIA'S** 120 Laurens St. • (803) 643-3086 • maliasrestaurant.com. For a lively night out at the inn, there's the circa 1898 **HOTEL AIKEN** and its Polo Tavern 235 Richland Ave. • (803) 648-4265 • hotelaiken.com.

Here in Aiken, the Palmetto Golf Club was founded in 1892 and is the fifth oldest in the country, and the Aiken Golf Club lays claim to being the first to offer women's tees.

Slow for horses

But horses are still what largely define Aiken to this day. That includes international polo tournaments, dirt roads in neighborhoods where drive-through visitors are expected to

go slow and stop frequently, and a tavern and downtown scene driven by the industry's money and zest for life.

For an informal tour, drive down South Boundary and admire the vaulted avenue of oaks and take a drive through the Aiken Equestrian District, east of Whiskey Road, where you can see polo fields, dirt roads, race tracks and a lot of horses. But note the speed limit is 15 mph, and you'll be expected to stop for horses and riders.

SOUTH CAROLINA LIVING TRAVEL GUIDE

SPECIAL ADVERTISING SECTION



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Farms, races and polo tournaments keep horses in the center of Aiken life.

Some of those farms have produced winners of Triple Crown races—think Kentucky Derby and the Preakness—but just to show they don't take themselves too seriously, locals created the annual Lobster Race, an event of family fun and food held each May in downtown Aiken and begun as an answer to Derby Weekend in Kentucky.

"There has been a real effort to keep our historic neighborhoods and downtown alive, and now we have all those beautiful buildings full of businesses that have not died off like in so many places," said Barbara Gassman, tourism supervisor for the city of Aiken. "Our downtown was revived in the early 1990s, and now it's so inviting.

"Our heritage is so rich because of the Winter Colony and then the people who came with the Savannah River Site...and our people are still our biggest asset. This is a very inviting and nice place to be," Gassman said. ☺

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MARCH 20
Tabacco Greenhouses
Quiet Brook Produce
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MARCH 25-27
Spring Planting Weekend & Easter Egg Hunt
Williams Muscadine Vineyard & Farm
Nesmith

APRIL 3
Spring Planting Event
L.W. Paul
Living History Farm
Conway

APRIL 8-11
Plant & Flower Festival
Pee Dee State Farmers Market
Florence

APRIL 17
Celebrating Rural Heritage - Past, Present & Future
Clemson U. Pee Dee Research & Education Center
Florence

APRIL 24
Freewoods Farm Festival
Freewoods Farm
Myrtle Beach

MAY 1
Key West Music & Wine Fest
La Belle Amie Vineyard
Little River

MAY 7-9
Race Weekend Farmers Market Event
Pee Dee State Farmers Market
Florence

MAY 15
Strawberry Festival
McLeod Farms
McBee

MAY 22
Wine Tasting
Hyman Vineyards
Conway