Historic Aiken Hospital Site

All are welcome and encouraged to attend a public hearing this Tuesday, beginning at 6pm, at City Council Chambers, where the City of Aiken Planning Commission will decide whether or not to grant a request to extend the Historic District to include the former Aiken Hospital Site. If granted, the buyer of the site would be eligible for historic tax credits needed to make any adaptive reuse projects on the site viable.

Some claim the Nurses Home and the Aiken Hospital, built in 1941 and 1936, respectively, are not important architecturally, because they are not ornate or ostentatious. Others feel the Nurses Home is not historically significant, because it simply served as an apartment building for women nurses.

But that was the point. In the quiet lines, quality craftsmanship, and colonial revival style of both buildings, harmonious with the natural landscape and organic sandstone wall, and in the function of the Nurses Home, to house young, single nurses partaking in a fairly new profession that gave them financial independence and access outside of the domestic sphere, the architecture and history of the Aiken Hospital Site demonstrates a period in Aiken overlooked by most Aikenites, historians and tourist websites, a time when Aiken emphasized traditional values yet forward-thinking, the rural yet modern.

While Aiken is commonly known as the place where the wealthy and elite came to play during the Gilded Age, downtown historic Aiken and the Aiken Hospital Site, in their ruralness, architecture and ethos, provide evidence the formation of the Aiken Winter Colony was a result of not so much the Gilded Age, but rather a reaction to it known as the American Arts and Crafts movement, the aesthetic counterpart to the Progressive Era.

The Gilded Age, in many ways the culmination of the Industrial Revolution, occurred between 1861-1900. Yet, the Aiken Winter Colony thrived between 1880 and 1941, the same time the American Arts and Crafts movement took root as a movement against the ill-effects of urbanization, industrialization, materialism and gender, race and class inequalities created by the Industrial Revolution.

While Gilded Age architecture is defined by mansions of lavish, machine-made ornament and manicured lawns, most historic buildings in Aiken demonstrate, first and foremost, modesty, craftsmanship, and harmony with nature in their preindustrial and Craftsman styles amid rustic, treelined streets and the Hitchcock Woods.

While the Rockefellers and Vanderbilts reigned in Newport and visited Aiken, it was a group of wealthy, progressive, reform-minded women from various American cities who, aware of Aiken’s history as a place for health through nature and climate, worked to cultivate Aiken in a way that ensured Aiken provided a genuine lifestyle for all. It was Celestine Eustis who first brought her ward, Louise Eustis, to Aiken for her health. It was also Celestine Eustis who helped fund the building of St. Claire's Chapel, designed by the architect of the Smithsonian Castle. It was Louise Hitchcock who first rode astride a horse, created the Aiken “horsey set” which was comprised of both men and women from all over the world, and established Aiken Preparatory School, a  progressive for the time country day and boarding school. It was Louise’s cousin, Marie Hofmann, wife of famed Romanticist pianist, who founded Fermata School for Girls, also a country day school, to see to it her daughter received a proper education in art as well as accounting and marketing. It was Edith Hope Goddard Iselin who was the first woman to compete as a crew member in America’s Cup yacht race, who served as a director of the Martha Schofield School for many years when it was operated under private auspices for the education of young African-Americans, and who hired the local, renowned, African American construction firm McGhee and McGhee to construct the Fermata School Gym and Stage Building, designed in the Craftsman Style, and first Aiken Hospital building, designed in a Colonial Revival Style in the Arts and Crafts Tradition.

And it was the Fermata School for Girls who shared ideals with and donated furnishings to the new Nurses Home as noted in the image above.

The Aiken Hospital Site is significant in its architecture and history, because it contributes to a more nuanced, inclusive and encompassing narrative of Aiken, one based on the ideals and aesthetics of the American Arts and Crafts movement as it influenced vital members of the Aiken Winter Colony.

Planning Commission, please vote yes to extend the Aiken Winter Colony Historic District III to include the Aiken Hospital Site