

Museum Around the Corner

The Georgetown County Historical Society Museum

Indigo ©

Georgetown has the distinction of enjoying prosperity for most of her three centuries of existence. The first wealth came in the 1740s when the indigo plant was introduced here. Some sources say it was a plant native to the east coast of America, but the overwhelming theory is that it was brought to Charleston in 1738 by George Lucas of Antigua in the Caribbean. After a year, he had to return to Antigua for military service, and left his three plantations in the care of his sixteen year old daughter, Eliza. The three plantations were located at Garden Hill on the Combahee River (1,500 acres), Wappoo Plantation (600 acres) on Wappoo Creek and another 3,000 acres on the Waccamaw River in Georgetown County. The family chose to reside at Wappoo, which was 17 miles by land to Charleston. This creek connected the Ashley and Cooper Rivers. It seems that the Waccamaw plantation tolerated the plant well and indigo took root all over Georgetown County. We do not know just where the Georgetown plantation existed, and we only know of it through one letter sent to her overseer to send the enslaved workers to Charleston to help at the other plantations.

Eliza took charge of experimentation in developing a good, strong indigo seed. After several years, she finally produced a top-quality product. The process of obtaining the dark bluish, purple dye consisted of harvesting the plants in the fall by chopping the entire plant down at ground level. These perennial plants grew back each Spring from the roots. They were put into a large wooden vat (the steeper) containing ammonia where a yellow colored substance was first extracted. The next step was to drain the solution into another vat, (the battery) where it was stirred constantly to incorporate air which turned it a deep, purple/ blue. The last step was to pour the solution into the settler where it thickened and became pasty. After pouring the thick mixture into molds, it was allowed to completely dry. The solid, claylike form was then ready for shipment.

The process of obtaining the indigo dye was a very odorous one because of the use of ammonia, and the vats had to be located in the uplands, far away from any habitation. Indigo exports grew from 5000 pounds to 130,000 pounds within two years, and became second only to rice as a cash crop. By 1775, South Carolina was exporting over 1 million pounds of indigo annually, with a present-day value of over \$30 million.

The demand for the rich, blue dye was heaviest from England, where it was used to dye navy uniforms and royal robes. A bounty paid to Georgetown planters to grow it exclusively for them made these Georgetown gentlemen very wealthy. The Winyah Indigo Society was formed in Georgetown as an agricultural club where they discussed the crop and cultivation and enjoyed reading newspapers from England, never more than a month old. News from the Continent "refreshed the inner man." The American Revolution (1775–83) brought an end to trade with Britain and that loss brought a swift demise to the indigo industry.

Eliza also experimented with other crops. She planted a large fig orchard, with the intention of drying figs for export, and experimented with flax, hemp, and silk. Her silk industry was especially successful. She was able to produce enough silk to make several beautiful dresses, one of which today is on display in the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, D.C.

In 1744, after her triumph with indigo, Eliza Lucas left her father's plantation to marry Charles Pinckney, an influential colonist, close friend since her arrival in the colonies, and a recent widower twice her age. She gave birth to her first child in 1746, and within five years, there were four children – three sons and a daughter. One of her sons died in infancy. Her daughter, Harriet, married Daniel Horry and became Mistress of Hampton Plantation. Eliza sought refuge there during the Revolutionary War.

Although the British destroyed the Pinckney plantations during the war, the family continued its prominence. Eliza's sons, Charles Cotesworth and Thomas Pinckney, were both American generals during the war.

In 1793, Eliza died in Philadelphia, where she had gone for medical treatment. She was so well regarded by her contemporaries, that President George Washington asked to serve as one of the pallbearers at her funeral. Her headstone in St. Peter's Churchyard in Philadelphia reads "Eliza Lucas Pinckney, 1722-1793, lies buried in unmarked grave. Mother of Two S.C. signers of Declaration of Independence." Actually, Eliza's son Charles Cotesworth Pinckney and his cousin Charles Pinckney signed the U.S. Constitution. Neither signed the Declaration of Independence.