

RED, WHITE AND BLACK MAKE BLUE

Eliza Lucas Pinckney: Indigo and the Fabric of Colonial South Carolina



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Opposite: The Old Plantation; Watercolour genre; Painting
Adjacent; Woman's wrap with indigo plants design,
Eliza Lucas Pinckney, early 1750s.

South Carolina is well known for its role in American textile history, chiefly for its cotton production and textile mills. South Carolina's important role in dye making is less known: from the middle of the 18th century until the Revolutionary War, South Carolina produced the bulk of blue dye used in Britain's textile manufacturing. This dye was indigo, and it coloured material that clothed virtually all those who lived within Britain's imperial orbit, including the slaves who grew indigo and made it into dye; the planters who owned the plantations where indigo flourished; and the Native Americans who lost land to plantations and who traded deerskins for the blue cloth that largely replaced the hides Indians previously wore. Indigo's success as a colonial South Carolina staple is attributed to a person not typically associated with the elite, masculine realm of Southern plantation administration: a teenager named Eliza Lucas Pinckney whose father put her in charge of running his South Carolina properties.

Eliza had great success with indigo for two reasons: her family owned rich land upon which to grow the plant and she had a great deal of assistance from skilled individuals. Wappoo was Eliza's first indigo growing plantation: her father George Lucas turned the property over to her in the late 1730s when he left to further a military and political career in Antigua, where the family originally lived. Wappoo consisted of the Lucas home, a barn, outbuildings, 600 acres of land, and stands of trees that Eliza, an avid botany enthusiast, had slaves plant. Although she lacked the training and networks of established botanists, Eliza acquired a great deal of knowledge about plants through her own initiative, and when

given responsibility for her father's plantations, she worked eagerly to cultivate and beautify them. Her letters are full of observations about and delight in native vegetation, as well as her efforts to get plants from the Caribbean to thrive at Wappoo. Eliza first had indigo seed planted there in summer 1740; although the resulting crop was largely killed by frost, her slaves harvested some seed which they grew the following summer. Although her 1741 yield was low, Wappoo's land ultimately supported many stands of indigo, and by 1745 the indigo Eliza introduced on her family plantations was praised in London.

The second factor that ensured Eliza's success with the dye plant was the help she received from several free and many enslaved people. Among the former was her neighbour Andrew Deveaux, who shared with her what he learned from his attempts to cultivate indigo; Nicholas and Patrick Cromwell, dye makers sent from Montserrat by George Lucas to teach his daughter and two family slaves how to make indigo dye; and Charles Pinckney, the man Eliza married who promoted the family's indigo in England. Among the many slaves who did the backbreaking labour of planting, tending, and harvesting indigo – as well as the strenuous and noisome work of making dye – a carpenter named Quash (later christened John Williams) stands out in particular. Although Patrick Cromwell produced good dye from brick vats, George Lucas feared that subsequent dye made in these vats could not be counted upon. Convinced that brick could compromise dye colour but that timber likely would not, Lucas charged Quash with improving the family's indigo concern by building wooden vats, dye works that indeed produced fine quality indigo.

Although costly French and Spanish indigo was considered the best in the 18th century and indeed coloured the most expensive, bespoke fabrics produced in Britain, foreign indigo was not the chief ingredient employed to colour the fabric that clothed most Britons. Cheaper, lighter, and easier to clean than luxury materials, common cloth was often cotton in whole or part, mixed into materials that included silk, wool, flax, and hemp. Since consumers of the period liked blue, and South Carolina indigo was readily available and economical, it showed up on a great many of the everyday garments and accessories that people wore. Although nobles and wealthy gentry wore embroidered silks and finely crafted woollens frequently coloured with fine dyes, the vast majority of people in Britain and its empire usually wore humbler fabrics typically made with lesser materials. South Carolina indigo was a key component of such dress.

Around 1752, Eliza created a beautiful white wrap for herself that features a pattern of indigo vines with delicate leaves. Surely a personal tribute to her success growing the 18th century crop, Eliza undoubtedly wore her wrap in the company of others and must have delighted in telling them about her experiments in cultivating the dye plant. For through her efforts, alongside those of her slaves, employees, and family, Pinckney helped make indigo an important staple in South Carolina and a key element of British colonial cloth manufacturing.

••• **Andrea Feeser. Summertime Blues Shibori with Indigo. Course led by Jane Callender at Chateau Dumas 13-20 August 2016 www.chateaudumas.com**