

# Eliza Lucas Pinckney

by Marcia Amidon Lusted



- 1 Eliza Lucas Pinckney's youth was not so different from that of other girls in the 1700s, especially English girls whose families had a certain amount of prestige and money. Eliza was born in 1722 on the island of Antigua in the Caribbean, where her father, a military officer, was serving. She had three younger siblings—two brothers and a sister. She went to finishing school in England, where she learned French, music, and other subjects appropriate for young women at that time.
- 2 In 1738, Eliza's family moved to South Carolina. Eliza probably would have lived her life as a pampered Southern lady, but her mother died shortly after the move. Later, her father had to return to Antigua. Suddenly, 16-year-old Eliza was responsible for raising her brothers and sister—and managing the three plantations that her father had bought!

- 3 Fortunately, Eliza was not your typical 18th-century young woman. She not only took on these responsibilities, but she also became one of the first important agriculturists in the soon-to-be United States. As she wrote to an English friend:
- 4 "I have the business of 3 plantations to transact, which requires much writing and more business and fatigue of other sorts than you can imagine. But least you should imagine it too burthensom to a girl at my early time of life, give me leave to answer you: I assure you I think myself happy that I can be useful to so good a father ..."
- 5 Eliza didn't just keep the plantations running. She had been interested in plants and botany since she was a child, and so she began to experiment with different types of crops that might grow in South Carolina. She wanted to make enough from the crops to keep the plantations running and make money for her family. Her father helped by sending her seeds, and one of the crops that she grew from those seeds was indigo.
- 6 Indigo is a tropical plant, one that Eliza had seen in Antigua. It had become known for the beautiful deep-blue dye that could be made from the plant. At a time when textile mills were beginning to make products like cloth and yarn, there was a big market for indigo dye. Eliza thought that she could make indigo into a moneymaking crop. If she could successfully grow it on the family's plantations, then American textile mills would no longer have to import it from India or the Caribbean. She wrote in 1740:

- 7 “Wrote my Father a very long letter on his plantation affairs and ... On the pains I had taken to bring the Indigo, Ginger, Cotton and [alfalfa] to perfection, and had greater hopes from the Indigo ...”
- 8 It took many years for Eliza to make indigo into a money-earning crop, and there were years when either drought or too much rain destroyed the plants. But she did not give up. She experimented with different varieties of indigo plants. She tried different methods and times for planting seeds and harvesting plants. She had help from slaves who had come to America from the West Indies and already knew how to grow and process indigo.
- 9 But just growing indigo crops was not enough. Eliza had to make dye, and that required a specific process. After the plants were cut, the fresh plants were put into a large pot and covered with water. Then they were pounded and stirred for as long as 20 hours. They had to be tended for that entire time, day and night, until they started to ferment. Once the water turned blue and began to bubble, the mixture was placed into another pot as it was still stirred constantly. Then the mixture sat until all the tiny particles of dye settled to the bottom. The water was poured off, and the indigo paste was put into cloth bags and hung up until more water drained from it. Then it was put in the sun to harden and finally cut into cakes that could be shipped to textile mills.
- 10 All of Eliza’s experiments with indigo paid off. She shared her knowledge with other plantation owners. In just five years, the amount of indigo dye exported from the colonies grew from 5,000 pounds a year to over 130,000 pounds. Between 1745 and 1775, when the American Revolution ended trade with England, South Carolina exported more than a million pounds of indigo every year. Today it would be worth \$30 million.
- 11 By the time she was 22, Eliza had made her father’s plantations profitable. Because she had earned respect as a plantation manager and agriculturist, she could decide for herself who she wanted to marry. She didn’t have to consider her father’s suggestions about her future husband. Eliza married Charles Pinckney in 1744, when she was 22. He was much older than she and had been her close friend since she arrived in America. After living in England for five years and giving birth to four children in five years, they returned to the colonies. Within six weeks of their return, Charles Pinckney died, leaving Eliza to manage his plantation and attend to the children.
- 12 Just as Eliza had experimented with ways to grow plants, she tried different theories of raising children. Her parenting obviously worked. Two of her sons became important generals during the American Revolution. One son, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, helped develop cotton as another new and important crop for South Carolina. He would also be one of the signers of the United States Constitution.
- 13 The British took Eliza’s property during the war, and she lost most of her money. She died in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1793. In 1989, Eliza Lucas Pinckney became part of the South Carolina Business Hall of Fame for her contributions to agriculture. Eliza had earned such a good reputation for her work that President George Washington was one of the pallbearers at her funeral.

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## Test Questions

*Circle the correct answer.*

**1. Eliza may best be described as a successful self-made businesswoman who never gave up. Select three sentences from the text that best prove this statement.**

- a. In just five years, the amount of indigo dye exported from the colonies grew from 5,000 pounds a year to over 130,000 pounds.
- b. She went to finishing school in England, where she learned French, music, and other subjects appropriate for young women at that time.
- c. She tried different methods and times for planting seeds and harvesting plants.
- d. By the time she was 22, Eliza had made her father's plantations profitable.
- e. Her father helped by sending her seeds, and one of the crops that she grew from those seeds was indigo.

**2. What is the best meaning for the word *pampered* as it is used in paragraph 2?**

- a. spoiled
- b. productive
- c. depressed
- d. enticed

**3. Which statement would the author most likely agree with?**

- a. Eliza never finished the jobs that she started.
- b. Eliza never earned the respect she deserved.
- c. Eliza never stopped working and experimenting.
- d. Eliza was rarely serious about anything she did.

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## Test Questions (*continued*)

**4. What effect did Eliza's indigo experiments have on what was to become the United States of America?**

- a. It made America poorer than England.
- b. It made America depend on England.
- c. It made America less popular than England.
- d. It made America more independent from England.

**5. What was Eliza's motivation for running a successful plantation?**

- a. She promised her mother she would never let the plantation fail.
- b. She wanted to get rich by becoming the first successful woman plantation owner.
- c. She wanted the world to know that women could do anything men could do.
- d. She was determined to make the plantations successful.