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# AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN: PLANTATION TEXTILE PRODUCTION FROM 1750 TO 1830

By  
Karen Hampton

## Introduction

Two hundred years ago the American landscape included African American women and children toiling in the indigo and cotton fields. Indigo stains covered their arms, and the fermenting stench followed them around the landscape. During this time weaving mills began to appear on plantations and these same women were trained in the craft of weaving. Today that history is all but lost.

Certainly, these African American women weavers succeeded in dressing their mistresses; however, their most important impact on the American economic scene was to complete their masters' plan to create a self-sustaining slave based economy. Not only was slave labor valued for profit and prestige, it provided the planters with a chance to create a self-sustaining farm. The plan was that the costs and expenses of slavery would be absorbed by the labor of the slaves themselves. It was this philosophy that led to the creation of a slave-based textile industry and the creation of the female Negro textile artisan.

In the low country of North and South Carolina and the Chesapeake Bay region of Virginia, African American women played a very important role in the development of textile production prior to the industrial revolution. Beginning with the development of indigo production in the mid-1700s and expanding to cotton, African American women began working in what was to become the early textile economy. They worked the cotton and indigo fields, then toiled over the stench of the indigo vats. Thereafter, these women became the spinners, weavers and dyers of the plantation south, and the actual originators of a robust textile economy.

The period from 1750 to 1830 was historically the time of the *Planter class*. All of the plantations that are the subject of this paper belonged to the budding upperclass of planters. In South Carolina many of these plantations played major roles in the Revolutionary War. Their owners were men of privilege who held substantial plantation lands dating from earlier land grants. These were gentlemen of some social stature, with holdings of between 150 and 500 African American slaves.

This paper distinguishes between two different groups of slaves; those involved in field production and those involved in the production and care of cloth. The women who are the subject of this paper -- both free and slave -- provided the backbone of heavy labor needed for the development of indigo, cotton production and plantation weaving. This paper will examine evidence substantiating how numerous colonial plantations that were connected through the Revolution and the creation of a slave based textile plantation economy.

## Indigo

As noted in *Slave Counterpoint*, Morgan notes that Alexander Gordon in a letter dated July 5, 1749 proclaimed Carolina "one of the best Indigo Countrys in the World.", then notes that a few years later, a Doctor Alexander Garden observed that planters were "so Intoxicate[d] with Indigo that . . . not nothing else but Indigo, Indigo hold be heard of."<sup>1</sup>

Prior to the Revolutionary War, indigo was the second largest field crop in the colonies, second only to rice. Production was subsidized by the British and large quantities of dye were exported. Britain was in great need of indigo for its own swelling textile industry. Wild indigo grew throughout South Carolina and there is documented research that the Huguenots began experimentation and production in the early 1700's.<sup>2</sup>

Prior to the mid-1700's, indigo had been grown on plantations throughout the Caribbean where much of its production was controlled by the French. Britain was forced to pay high tariffs, and thus felt the need for land to expand the crop.<sup>3</sup> "Indica" as it was then known, was brought as seed from the Caribbean where it had been grown by both the French and British. Expansion began in the mid 1700's as Britain's need for blue dye increased.

The greatest expansion of indigo production was from 1745 to 1775. Folklore credits this expansion to Eliza Lucas Pinckney, the daughter of Governor Lucas of Montserrat, who sent her to South Carolina to oversee his plantations.<sup>4</sup> Whether Eliza Lucas Pinckney was or was not the "Mother of American indigo", she did play an important role in its establishment as a major crop. Eliza with her family connections and the labor of her slaves contributed to the success with which indigo production expanded. In those 30 years indigo exports increased tenfold, from 100,000 pounds to 1,150,662 pounds.<sup>5</sup>

Following Eliza Pinckney's successful experiments with indigo, Thomas Boone was appointed the "Surveyor and Inspector General of Indigo" in 1762. The production and sale of indigo was controlled by some 25 planters and merchants. Most of the production was located in the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina with production extending along the South Carolina coast. While indigo was a very important crop historically, it was considered as a secondary crop, and it was planted during the fallow season of rice, and cotton.

The processing of indigo was considered good work for female slaves. It required only a few skilled laborers. The work was similar to the domestic work done on the plantations.

The growing season for indigo began in April with a first harvest in July and a second in September. Slaves worked in the fields tending the crop and keeping them weed free. They were expected to cultivate between 1-1/2 and 2 acres a day. Each acre was expected to produce approximately 50 pounds of indigo.<sup>6</sup> After the crop was harvested the plants were quickly transported through a series of different vats. First the steeper vat then the fermentation vat and finally the lime vat. The fermentation of indigo needed to be completed swiftly. It was difficult work because of the intense labor and the harsh working conditions. For the slaves, processing indigo involved beating the plants and pouring on and off large amounts of water. All this while working under the harsh conditions created from the putrid smell of fermenting indigo and the

myriad of insects attracted to the vats.<sup>7</sup> The stench was so great on the plantation that owners frequently located the processing area at least one quarter mile from their residence. This processing took from 12-15 hours and as soon as a batch was completed in the steeper, the next was delivered.

Morgan (161) quotes a Planter describing the labor associated with indigo production. "it generally takes two Negroes near an hour and is considered hard labour" -- and the "violent, constant stirring and beating" of the fermented liquid lasted from about July to October. Nevertheless, processing ended at about the same time as harvesting, for, after the indigo paste was allowed to dry before being packed for export.<sup>8</sup>

In a Federal Writers Project interview Annie Ruth Davis conducted with Eugenia Woodberry, an ex-slave describes indigo on the plantation along the S.C coast.

Den dey make de blue cloth outer dat t'ing dat dey raise right dere on de plantation call indigo. Dere some uv dat indigo dat does grow up dere on de Sand Hills dis day en time but ain' nobody ne'er worry 'bout it no more.<sup>9</sup>

The effects of indigo extended far into the culture of the South Carolina Gullah slaves. In West Africa it was traditional that, following the completion of an indigo vat, villagers used the sludge to color their doors and windows. During WPA interviews of former slaves spoke of how that most slave cabins were painted blue and that it was believed to keep the evil spirits away, by reminding them of heaven.<sup>10</sup>

## **Cotton**

Following the Revolutionary War, indigo subsidies collapsed, forcing the fall of indigo. However, it was not until the 1790's that indigo production finally died out due to the rise in cotton production. Cotton was becoming *King*. The cotton gin was created and a cheaper short stable cotton allowed production to flourish. This new type of cotton, combined with new technology, no longer required the great labor formerly associated with its production and use.

By 1800, the cotton harvests of South Carolina's plantations grew to 6,000,000 pounds.<sup>11</sup> Following the invention of the cotton gin, cotton became more widely grown and plantation weaving developed as a cottage industry. Prior to the expansion of the 1790's, Sea Island cotton (a long stable cotton) had been grown as a small cottage crop frequently found in slave gardens. This allowed slave women freedom to spin and weave small amounts of cloth for their families or for bartering.<sup>12</sup>

Cotton, unlike rice or indigo, required few skills and turned a great profit. The cotton gin led to greater efficiency allowing for short stable cotton to be separated and cleaned in a very short time. This increased the quantity of cotton on the plantations, thus putting more of a strain on the slaves in the field. There was great fear on the part of planters that slaves would become economically independent. Accordingly, in 1796 South Carolina enacted laws preventing shop owners from trading with slaves.<sup>13</sup>

The cotton gin was invented in 1793, and allowed cotton production to expand, which, in turn, enabled more planters to move into the Planter class. One example of this was Thomas Boone, the Surveyor and Inspector General of Indigo who owned Boone Hall, one of the largest cotton plantations just outside of Charles Towne, South Carolina. In 1817 Boone Hall had 97 slaves. Approximately one third of the field workers at Boone Hall were African American women.

During an interview conducted by Ann Ruth Davis an ex-slave describes how cotton was put in the gin and separated and pressed into bales.

Minus on Chrismus Gause hab job dere to de gin house. Dey'ud jes put de cotton in dat gin en de seed go one way ne de lent go de udder way. Minus hadder feed de gin en dem udder helper hadder hand de cotton. Den Bacchus hadder work de sorew dat press de bale togedder. Yunnah chillun ain' ne'er see nuthin lak dat dese days. Dem hosses pull dat t'ing round en round en dat screw ge' tighter en tighter. Turn out pretty uh bale uv cotton us yunnah o'er hear 'bout in no time tall. My laws, I 'member dey is hab bale uv cotton pile up aw 'bout dat gin house.<sup>14</sup>

Somerset Place plantation, located on 1600 acres in the northeastern region of North Carolina was established five years after the Declaration of Independence. Somerset Place was another example of a self-sustaining plantation. Nearly everything used by the Collin family and its slaves was produced on the plantation, including cotton and flax. From 1838 to 1839, 80,000 bales of cotton were picked from 20 acres. Cotton fields covered 201 acres and 53 slaves worked the fields. The plantation housed both a gin, a loom house and had twelve slave quarters devoted to artisans and house slaves.<sup>15</sup>

## **Clothing**

On average slaves were given one set of clothing for the winter and a lighter set for the summer. The cloth was coarse, usually of wool or linen. After 1790, cotton clothing replaced linen. The general allotment of fabric for a slave's clothing was 5 yards a year. Fabric was either left natural or dyed in indigo. Indigo was usually applied in stripe, although occasionally a whole cloth might be dyed.<sup>16</sup> Prior to plantation weaving most of the cloth was imported from Britain or Germany. Frequently, they received the ends of lots so slaves wore an unusual mix of different cloth. By the turn of the century, cotton cloth was being produced locally and the quality standardized.

Free Negro clothing was prescribed in 1735 with the adoption of the Negro Act, which ensured that free Negro clothing was kept to a standard just above that of slaves.<sup>17</sup> The clothing of both free Negroes and slaves was generally of coarse and inexpensive material. Flax and cotton were acceptable. Clothing was to be natural or blue with stripes, check, gingham or calico.

## **Production Spinning and Weaving**

From the mid-1700's weaving mills, spinning rooms and loom houses began to appear throughout South and North Carolina and Virginia. Hirsch (Huguenots of Colonial South

Carolina) quotes Seabrook, *Memoirs on Cotton*, Published in the S. C. American General Gazette, Jan. 30, 1777 .

“We are well informed that a planter to the Southward who 3 months ago had not a Negro that could either spin or weave has now 30 hands constantly employed from whom he gets 120 yards of good wearable stuff made of woollen and cotton every week. He had only one white woman to instruct the Negroes in spinning and one white man to instruct in weaving. Soon he will clothe all of his own Negroes and supply neighbors. This is a most effectual way of lessening the present exorbitant prices of cloth.”

As early as 1745, Governor Lucas wrote to his daughter Eliza Pinckney of the value slave women could be if they were trained to spin and weave, and this was found to be true throughout the region. More and more planters were looking to make their plantations self-sufficient. Textiles were the key, made possible by the invention of the cotton gin 1790, the hand carding machine, and the fly shuttle loom. Planters began to train a number of 2nd and 3rd generation female slaves in textile production.<sup>18</sup> As Governor Lucas stated in 1745:

I send by this Sloop two Irish servants, viz.: A Weaver and a Spinner. I am informed Mr. Cattle hath produced both Flax and Hemp. I pray you will purchase some, and order a loom and spinning-wheel to be made for them, and set them to work. I shall order Flax sent from Philadelphia with seed, that they may not be idle. I pray you will also purchase Wool and sett them to making Negroes clothing which may sufficient for my own People. As I am afraid one spinner can't keep a loom at work, I pray you will order a sensible Negroe woman or two to learn to spin, and wheels to be made for them; the man Servant will direct the Carpenter in making the loom and the woman will redirect the Wheel.

The following year Eliza Pinckney responded to her father that the woman had spun all the material they could get, so were idle; that the loom had been made, but had no tackling; that she would make the harness for it, if two pounds of shoemaker's thread were sent her. "The sensible Negro woman and hundreds of others learned well to spin, and excellent cloth has been always woven in the low country of Carolina, as well as in the upper districts, till our own time."<sup>19</sup>

In 1775 one South Carolina planter, Ralph Izad, promised to pay Martha Chubb 100 pounds a year for 4 years to have 8 slave girls trained to spin and weave and another 50 pounds to knit. In 1752 Landon Carter introduced spinning and weaving to his slave at his Virginia plantation Sabine Hall. Carter constructed a *weaving manufactory* where he kept 2 looms, 1 cotton gin, 4 flax wheels, 5 great wheels, 5 pairs of wool cards and 1 hackle for processing linen.<sup>20</sup>

By 1814 President Thomas Jefferson was producing 1200 yards of cloth at his Monticello Plantation and was clothing 130 slaves. At Monticello, Jefferson's created an institution where the girls of Mulberry Row learned to spin. Mulberry Row housed both the craftspeople and the house slaves of the plantation. At 10 years old female slaves were introduced to the loom room and spinning, where they worked until they reached 16 years old.<sup>21</sup> At that time, their work was

evaluated by the head spinner and weavers they were either to continue spinning, move on to weaving or go to the fields. The cloth factory was located at the end of Mulberry Row closest to the main house.

Frequently the women chosen for this work were related to the master of the plantation and were very light in complexion, sometimes looking white. At Monticello, the slave relatives of Thomas Jefferson made up much of the artisan class. The head weaver, Mary was Martha Jefferson half-niece and Harriet, Thomas Jefferson's young slave daughter, were, respectively, a weaver and spinner.<sup>22</sup>

Tempe Herndon Durham, in her post Civil War narrative below, not only describes the loom room but also addresses what individual talents were and how the slaves created community amongst themselves as they wove.

Dey was a big weaving' room whare de blankets was wove, and' dey wove de cloth for de winter clothes to. Linda Hernton an' Milla Edwards was de head weavers, dey looked after de weaving, of da fancy blankets. Mis' Betsy was a good weaver too. She weave de same as de niggers. She say she love de clackin' soun' of de loom an' de way de shuttles run in an' out carrying' a tael of bright colored thread. Some days she set at de loom all de mawning' peddlin' wid her fets an' her white ha's flittin' over de bobbins. De carding' and' spinnin' room was full of niggers. I can hear dem spinnin' wheels now turnin' roun' an' sayin' hum-m-m-, hum-m-m-m, an' hear de slaves singin' while dey spin. Mammy Rachel stayed in de dyein' room<sup>23</sup>.

As shown by the inclusion of quotations from the narratives and journals of former slaves and slave owners, and use of historical evidence I have demonstrated how the African American female slaves were clearly tied to early American textile production. The recollections of these participants, from both sides of the slave-based textile economy, provides evidence of the expectations that were demanded of the female slave textile artisans, what they produced and what their harsh working environment looked like.

## Conclusion

In my quest to explore my heritage and understand slavery I discovered a thread connecting me to the colonial past. As an African American weaver I have questioned why African Americans were so underrepresented in the contemporary weaving community. Believing as I do that all things having a traceable history I was driven to understand the lack there of. Through research I have come to understand how this history was forgotten and the importance of inclusion. History is constructed of many stories, and through the sharing of story will we move forward to create a new reality, and though the validation of voice can we feel our own value and have the strength to learn our own life lessons. I believe that only by examining history and looking at its demons are we able to heal and create new realities.

- <sup>1</sup> Philip Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the 18<sup>th</sup> c. Chesapeake and Low Country*, University of North Carolina, 159.
- <sup>2</sup> Arthur Henry Hirsch, Ph.D., *Huguenots of Colonial South Carolina*, (London Archon Books, 1962), 214
- <sup>3</sup> George C. Rogers, Jr., *The History of Georgetown County, South Carolina*, (University of South Carolina Press 1970), 215.
- <sup>4</sup> Eliza Pinckney edited by Elise Pinckney and Marvin Zahniser, *The Letterbook of Eliza Lucas Pinckney 1739-1762*, (University of South Carolina Press 1972) xvi.
- <sup>5</sup> Hirsch, 217.
- <sup>6</sup> Morgan, 89.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid, 163.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid. 161
- <sup>9</sup> Retrieved February 15, 2000 from the World Wide Web: <http://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll>
- <sup>10</sup> Margaret Washington Creel, *A Peculiar People –Slave Religion and Community-Culture Among the Gullahs*, (New York University Press 1988) 321.
- <sup>11</sup> Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone The First Two Centuries Of Slavery In North America*, (Harvard Press 1998), 307.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid 302.
- <sup>13</sup> Betty Wood, *Women's Work, Men's Work*, (University of Georgia Press 1995) 77.
- <sup>14</sup> Retrieved April 7, 2000 from the World Wide Web: <http://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll>
- <sup>15</sup> *The Independent*, Elizabeth City, NC Sept. 28, 1916.
- <sup>16</sup> Collins memo book, Josiah Collins Papers, NCSA.
- <sup>17</sup> *Everyday Life in Colonial South Carolina*, 189.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid., 189.
- <sup>19</sup> John Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House*, (Chapel Hill 1977).
- <sup>20</sup> Monticello, Mulberry Row Interpreter July 18, 1999.
- <sup>21</sup> Thomas Jefferson Farm Book, 152.
- <sup>22</sup> George P. Renwick, *The American Slave Vol. II*, (Greenwood Publishing 1972), North Carolina Narratives, 284.

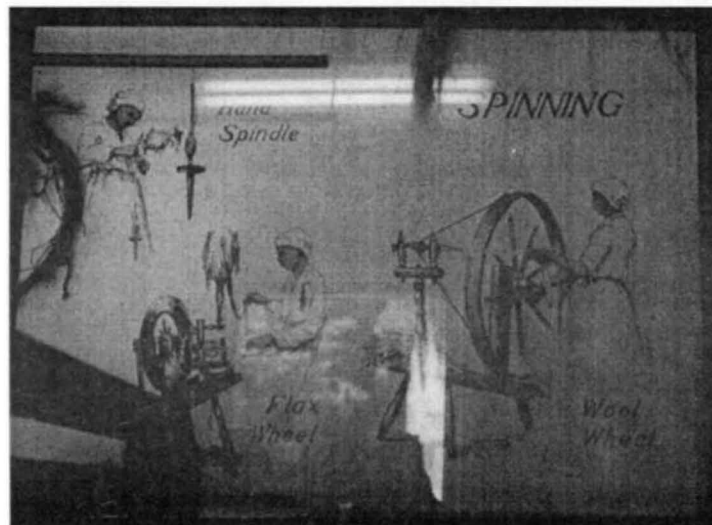


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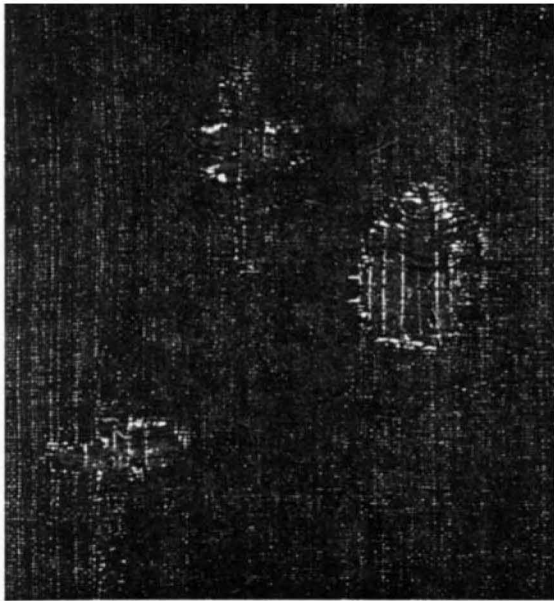
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