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REPUTATION OF CAROLINA INDIGO

JOHN J. WINBERRY *

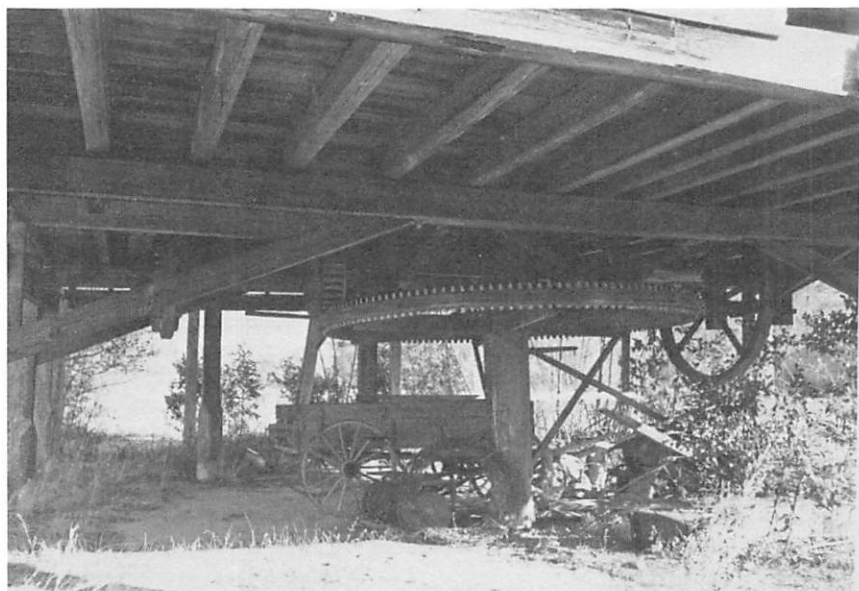
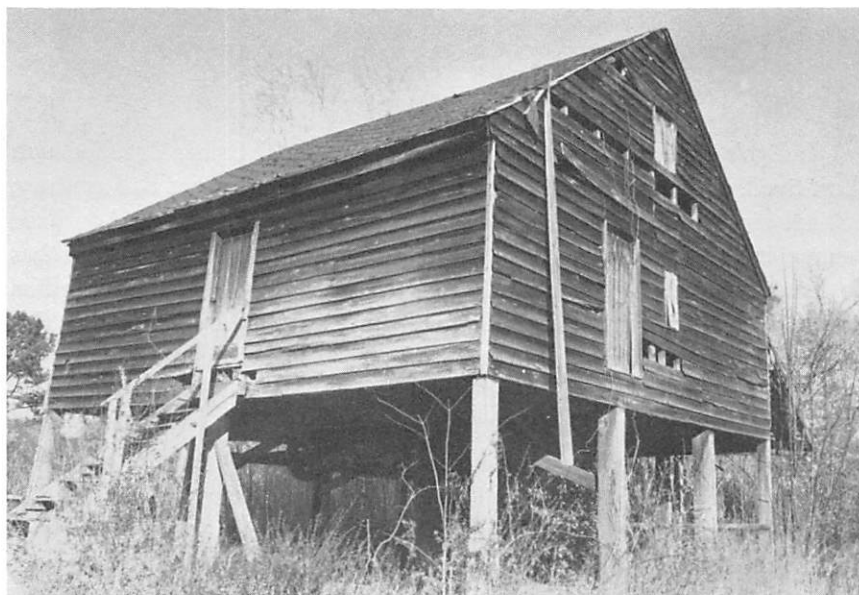
Indigo's role as a commercial crop for colonial South Carolina was short-lived. Production of it extended over approximately a half century, but only in the decade prior to the Revolution could it be said to have been a major export staple. Renewed study of the crop's history has dealt with various topics, but the question of the reputation of Carolina indigo in the London market has not been considered. This paper also focuses on other factors associated with the crop's rise and decline.

Development as a Staple

The revival of indigo production in Carolina traditionally has been ascribed to the work of Eliza Lucas Pinckney. Though her and her husband's contributions to the renewal of production were important, the familiarity of French Huguenots with the crop, early plantings of indigo in North Carolina and Georgia, and the role of pamphlets and newspaper accounts are increasingly cited as major elements in the crop's history.¹ The renewal of production in the 1740s, however, does not explain why indigo became a major export staple some twenty-five years later. Traditionally, the Parliamentary bounty of 1749 has been cited as the cause of success, but its role has been increasingly downgraded in favor of that of war and other government manipulations of

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¹ The French Huguenots had grown indigo at the end of the seventeenth century and undoubtedly were familiar with the crop's production, perhaps growing limited quantities during the eighteenth century. "Letters from John Stewart to William Dunlop," this *Magazine*, 32 (1931): 21; Arthur H. Hirsch, "French Influence on American Agriculture in the Colonial Period," *Agricultural History*, 4 (1930): 8-9. Although production is not definite, indigo was mentioned in early accounts for North Carolina and Georgia, William L. Saunders, ed., *The Colonial Records of North Carolina* (Raleigh, 1886-1888), IV, 392; Allen D. Candler, ed., *The Colonial Records of the State of Georgia*, 25 (Atlanta, 1915): 97. For early newspaper accounts, see *South-Carolina Gazette* for October 8, 1744, October 22, 1744, October 29, 1744, April 1, 1745, November 4, 1745, November 11, 1745, December 2, 1745, and December 9, 1745. See also David L. Coon, "Eliza Lucas Pinckney and the Reintroduction of Indigo Culture in South Carolina," *The Journal of Southern History*, 42 (1976): 61-76, and David L. Coon, "The Development of Market Agriculture in South Carolina, 1670-1785," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois (1972), pp. 215-68.



The Gin House at Browntown (*above*) was set 10 feet above the ground allowing space for the power mechanism underneath. Two horses were harnessed to these wheels, which were made on the place of native wood. The central wheel is 14 feet in diameter.

1976 photo by Buzz Elliott

the market.² The importance of Britain's wars as causes of temporarily increased production of indigo is undoubted, but the particular role of the Parliamentary bounty cannot be overlooked.

Indigo experienced an immediate increase in production during King George's War, as traditional French and Spanish sources of the dye were cut off. This situation ended with peace in 1748, and many planters deserted indigo and returned to rice production. The halt of this precipitant collapse of the nascent indigo industry was a basic purpose of the bounty.³ Despite its adoption however, colonial production declined during the 1750s. A 1752 report to the Board of Trade noted, "The encouragement lately given by the Parliament had not answered the end proposed, the Carolina indigo being bad and but a small quantity produced."⁴

Planters were aware of the bounty's benefit at its inception, because it was reported in early 1749 that indigo was "being kept back I suppose to come in for the bounty."⁵ The bounty, however, was paid not to the planter but to the importer and as a result its full impact was somewhat attenuated. Nevertheless, the six pence per pound subsidy (about 20 per cent market value) allowed the importer to offer artificially higher prices to the planter, and this apparently made the crop attractive enough for at least minimal production to continue. These planters increased their familiarity with the crop, maintained necessary processing equipment, and kept up the production of seed. In other words, the bounty facilitated the crop's passage through a transition period. The 1750s and early 1760s were crucial in that they fell between indigo's earlier position as a wartime emergency replacement of rice and its subsequent status as a commercial staple. The bounty prepared the way for indigo's rise in the decade prior to the Revolution.

Into the mid-1760s indigo's production continued increasing, and cultivation spread along the Santee, Pee Dee, Black, and Savannah

² See especially G. Terry Sharrer, "Indigo in Carolina, 1671-1796," this *Magazine*, 72 (1971): 94-103.

³ The recovery of rice, it was argued, "may induce the planter to continue his hands on rice, that he is used to, and knows the profits of, rather than in making indigo that may appear to be more precarious, and in which he is not so well skilled." James Crockatt, "Reasons for Laying a Duty on French and Spanish Indigo and Granting a Bounty on What is Made in the British Plantations," (1748), C. O. 5/372, I. 6 x 7, British Public Record Office, London.

⁴ *Journal of the Commissioners for Trade and Plantations from January 1749-50 to December 1753* (London, 1932), pp. 270-71.

⁵ Henry Laurens to William Stone, May 18, 1748, Philip M. Hamer and George C. Rogers, Jr., ed., *The Papers of Henry Laurens* (Columbia, 1968) I, 213.

Rivers into the interior of South Carolina. In 1764, the bounty was reduced from six to four pence per pound.⁶ It has been argued, however, that the Carolina planters' crop was further protected by a six pence duty placed on imports of foreign indigo. This would have given the Carolina product a ten pence advantage in the market, and encouraged its increased production up to the Revolutionary years.⁷ No such tariff, however, ever was imposed; the American Revenue Act placed a duty on foreign indigo imported into America, but no tax ever interfered with the free entry of the dye into London. What caused indigo's success was simply increased demand. During the period 1770-75, some 1,600,000 pounds of indigo were annually imported into England from all sources, a 120 percent increase over the average annual import of 722,699 pounds between 1750 and 1755.⁸ The American product benefitted from this expanding market. Furthermore, Carolina produced predominantly the cheaper "copper indigo," which was in greatest demand.⁹ One problem faced, however, was the generally poor quality of the product.

Reputation

Carolina indigo throughout its history had a poor reputation in the London market. This lowered the price that the dye could command and undoubtedly frustrated interest in the crop during its first two decades. Indigo's rise to importance after 1765 seems to have been little effected by its reputation; in fact, the resultant lower price may have been somewhat beneficial. Problems, however, did return in the 1790s.

When they first grew indigo for the commercial market in the 1740s, Carolina planters as a group were unfamiliar with the method of processing. Advertisements in the *South-Carolina Gazette* offered instructions on indigo cultivation and manufacture, and one pamphlet detailing the

⁶ 3 Geo. III, c. 25, *The Statutes at Large*, Vol. 25, Part 1 (Cambridge: 1763), pp. 357-58.

⁷ Both Leila Sellers, *Charleston Business on the Eve of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 1934), p. 180, and Sharrer, "Indigo in Carolina," p. 97, refer to the six pence duty on foreign indigo imported into Britain, enacted in 1764. I could find no such Act; a six pence duty, however, was applied to foreign indigo "imported or brought into any colony or plantation in America," 4 Geog. III, c 15, *Statutes at Large*, Vol. 26, 33-52. As early as 1734 (7 Geo. II, c. 18, *Statutes at Large*, Vol. 16, 472), indigo was imported free of duty into England, an Act that was renewed throughout the eighteenth century.

⁸ Computed from Customs 3, British Public Record Office.

⁹ "The consumption of it is more than of both the other kinds," James Crockatt, "Further Observations Intended for Improving the Culture and Curing of Indigo, etc. in South-Carolina," (1747), in H. Roy Merrens, ed., *The Colonial South Carolina Scene* (Columbia, 1977), pp. 147-48.

Santo Domingo techniques was offered in 1746. With time the planters' knowledge increased, but the reputation of Carolina indigo did not correspondingly improve.

As early as 1747, the Carolina product was criticized:

The chief defect of much of the Carolina indigo was that it became too hard on the surface and not fully cured in the center. Importers also noticed that in many of the casks there was nothing but a black spongy substance producing a muddy effect, as if the indigo were mixed with soil. In others the dye was so very light in colour as to convey the suspicion that flour or starch had been added; while in still others different grades of indigo were mixed. Further, great carelessness was shown by planters in providing proper containers for this valuable commodity. Old rice barrels were frequently used, with the result that there were serious losses by reason of leakage and exposure. All this contrasted unfavourably with the high quality of the French product.¹⁰

In 1748 a Carolina merchant wrote, "The last years crop of Carolina indigo having prov'd very ordinary it seems to labour under so bad a character at this markt as I fear will greatly prejudice what may come from thence hereafter."¹¹ In 1749 Governor Glen commented on its quality,

perhaps we are not conversant enough in this commodity, either in the culture of the plant or in the method of managing and manufacturing it. . . . I am afraid that the lime water which some use, to make the particles subside, is prejudicial to it, by precipitating different kinds of particles, and consequently incorporating them with the indigo. . . .¹²

In that same year, the Parliamentary bounty became effective, but it initially had little impact on quantity and especially quality of indigo

¹⁰ Lawrence H. Gipson, *The British Isles and the American Colonies: The Southern Plantations, 1748-1754* (New York, 1960) II, 137.

¹¹ Henry Laurens, London, to George Austin, Charleston, 27 December, 1748, Hamer and Rogers, *Papers of Henry Laurens*, I, 200.

¹² "Answers from James Glen Esquire, Governour of South Carolina, to the Queries from the Right Honourable The Lords Commissioners for Trade and Plantations," C.O. 5/372, I. 47, British Public Record Office. Though denied by many during the Colonial era, recent experiments directed by Mr. Janson L. Cox, Charles Town Landing, South Carolina, have shown that lime water does effect the dye's color and quality.

production; the Commissioners for Trade and Plantations in 1752 noted, "the Carolina indigo being bad and but a small quantity produced."¹³ In 1760 Thomas Mellichamp, who introduced an improved processing technique, implied the poor quality of Carolina indigo by criticizing his fellow planters; they "steep soundly and beat roundly, and when they have jumbled a parcel of corrupt filth together, put in lime water to subside it, and when dry, they are obliged to take the advantage of every light to convince them that it is *copper indigo*."¹⁴ Dr. John Mitchell, in 1767, argued that "the French and Spaniards make great quantities worth eight and ten shillings a pound, when the little we make in Carolina is not upon an average worth above two shillings, and a great deal has been sold for a shilling and less."¹⁵ In 1762 Carolina merchants and planters had recognized this situation and supported the appointment of Moses Lindo as "Surveyor and Inspector-General of the Indico made in the said province." The governor's proclamation noted his appointment was "in order to bring the indico produce into reputation at home and at foreign markets."¹⁶ In 1772, however, Lindo resigned his position, writing that "he would not seal certain classes of indigo 'and bring disgrace on the Seal with a crown over G.R.'"¹⁷ Indigo in the 1770s was at its peak production in Carolina, but her planters were "blamed by the English merchants for paying too much attention to the quantity, and too little to the quality of their indigo."¹⁸

Not even after the Revolution, when Carolina indigo sold on an open market, did its reputation improve. In fact, Carolina indigo was automatically considered of inferior grade. One planter wrote, "I have made such [indigo] as being mistaken for Guatamala was estimated at 13/cwt., altho' as Carolina honest Mister Richardson would give only about half a guinea for it."¹⁹ In the last years of production, it was noted that

too many of the Carolina planters, who raised this crop after the revolution, . . . made theirs of inferior quality . . . while the Spanish and East India indigo was selling from six shillings to nine shillings

¹³ *Journal of the Commissioners*, p. 271.

¹⁴ *South-Carolina Gazette*, August 16-23, 1760.

¹⁵ *American Husbandry* (London, 1775), I, 400.

¹⁶ *South-Carolina Gazette*, September 18-25, 1762.

¹⁷ Barnett A. Elzas, *The Jews of South Carolina* (Philadelphia, 1905), p. 64.

¹⁸ Alexander Hewatt, "An Historical Account of The Rise and Progress of the Colonies of South Carolina and Georgia" (1779), in B. R. Carroll, *Historical Collections of South Carolina* (New York, 1836), I, 389.

¹⁹ Letter of 20 June, 1786, Henry Laurens Papers, Microfilm Roll 8, South Caroliniana Library, Columbia.

sterling per pound in London, Carolina indigo was seldom worth more than three or four shillings.

One lot of Carolina indigo

for sale in London in the year 1795 . . . was wretchedly put up *in casks*, the cakes broken in pieces, the quality of the worst kind, and the difference between the Carolina and the London weight ruinous, not having been well dried when sent to market. No prudent merchant will touch such commodities.²⁰

Carolina planters offered two general explanations for the poor reputation of their product. The first invoked physical factors: "neither does the soil or climate seem to be fit to yield that rich juice which makes this dye in any plenty or perfection."²¹ As well, it was argued that in its manufacture "there is something at times either in the air or water that is not discover'd which confounds those of the best experience."²² The second, ardently believed by many planters, was that their indigo was discriminated against by London merchants: "to the very great discouragement of the planters, the dealers in that commodity have combined to lessen and run down the value of it, till they get it at a very low rate, into their hands, and then sell it for French indigo; which they set a much higher value upon."²³ This was partially true, but the poor quality was largely responsible for its low market value.

Despite their arguments, the major causes of indigo's poor quality were the indifference of the planters themselves to the manufacturing process and "the unskilfulness, malice, or carelessness of their head-men and workmen."²⁴ A partial explanation of this, indirect though it was, can be found in the failure of the Parliamentary bounty, which had been instituted not only to increase production but to improve quality.

²⁰ "On the Cultivation and Preparation of Indigo," *The Southern Agriculturalist*, 2 (1829): 163-64.

²¹ *American Husbandry*, I, 400.

²² Henry Laurens to Devonshire, Reeve, and Lloyd, 18 November, 1756, Hamer and Rogers, *Papers of Henry Laurens*, II, 354.

²³ "The State of Indigo Manufacturing in South Carolina," *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 31 (1761): 440.

²⁴ Johann D. Schoepf, *Travels in the Confederation; 1783-1784* (Cleveland: 1911), p. 159. "Some mixture by the carelessness of Negroes or overseer has crept into this lot too," Henry Laurens to Ross and Mill, 7 December, 1767, George C. Rogers and David R. Chesnutt, *Papers of Henry Laurens*, Vol. 5 (Columbia, 1976), p. 496. Lewis C. Gray felt that the abundance of land and scarcity of labor encouraged a less intensive production of indigo in contrast to the West Indies and a resultant poorer quality dye, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860* (Washington, 1933), I, 294.

Under its provisions, no indigo was to receive the "praemium" or payment if it was "not good and merchantable, and free from any false mixture," or if it was

not worth three shillings the pound weight, when the best French, or other indico, of equal goodness with the best French, is worth four shillings the pound weight; and so in the same proportion, in case the price of the best French, or other indico of equal goodness, shall be at a higher or lower price.²⁵

This provision was weakly enforced. Most Carolina indigo was not entitled to the bounty (its value throughout the era of its production was about 5/11 of that of French indigo), but an estimated 7/8 did receive it.²⁶ This created an attitude among planters that quality production and its additional costs were useless because the bounty "continues to be, more frequently given to as bad as any is made, than to as good as can possibly be produced." As a result, the planters became "very careless how it is managed in the making, as they perceive that they stand as good a chance for the bounty being allowed for such as is good for little or nothing, as they do for the best that can possibly be made."²⁷ The basic fault in the bounty system was the absence of any inspection.²⁸ The Act required that the planter simply appear before a local Justice of the Peace to receive certification that the quantity was produced on his plantation; certificates to the same effect were received from the merchant, master of the ship, and customs agents in England. The last also declared "that the said indigo is good and merchantable;" as well "the said officers [were] required to grant [it] within ten days next after the landing thereof, unless they can assign sufficient cause for their refusal."²⁹ Customs agents were required to inspect the imported dye, but indigo that under this last provision was good until proven bad would probably not be rejected.

Decline of Indigo

Indigo production slowly recovered after the Revolution, despite the end of the bounty, and in 1794 Charleston exported some 715,000 pounds of the dye. The revival of production was due primarily to the continued viability of the British market, which, for instance, imported

²⁵ 21 Geo. II, c. 30, *Statutes at Large*, Vol. 19, 253.

²⁶ Gray, *History of Agriculture*, I, 292.

²⁷ "The State of Indigo Manufacturing," p. 440.

²⁸ George C. Rogers, Jr., *The History of Georgetown County* (Columbia, 1970), p. 37.

²⁹ 21 Geo. II, c. 30, *Statutes at Large*, 252.

1,867,754 pounds of indigo from all sources in 1792 alone.⁸⁰ After 1796, however, the industry in Carolina collapsed, and planters began experimenting with alternative crops such as cotton. Three basic causes can be isolated for this: competition from India, rising overhead costs, and natural disasters; but a fourth element, the Carolina product's poor quality and worsening price, must also be considered.

The precipitating factor undoubtedly was the competition from India. The East India Company had initiated indigo production in 1779, and by 1786 it annually totalled 250,000 pounds.⁸¹ The 1790s saw even larger quantities of this relatively high quality dye reaching Europe's market, because in 1809 India's exports to London totalled 4,704,926 pounds.⁸² As noted above, South Carolina's indigo was of a persistently poor quality throughout the eighteenth century. As the price for higher quality Indian dye progressively declined as supply increased, that of the poorer Carolina dye decreased even further. Carolina indigo at best brought prices one half that of the East India product. To complicate matters, the post-Revolution was a period of economic crisis; capital investment was required to restore buildings, equipment, land, seed-stocks, and especially the slave labor force. The last was most crucial, because prices of slaves between 1766 and 1790 had almost doubled. As one merchant noted in 1786, "no price was too high if credit . . . was to be obtained."⁸³ Finally, throughout the history of indigo cultivation in Carolina, natural disasters were a constant threat to the industry. Droughts and frosts were common, but a crop could be ruined by floods, too much rain, or insect infestations. In fact, these made indigo a terrible gamble for a planter; in a good year he might produce about sixty-seven pounds of dye per acre, but in a bad year he could at best hope for some three pounds.⁸⁴

The dynamics of collapse were simple. Labor, especially in the back country, was the major capital investment, and profit was based upon return per hand. With the price of slaves rising and intensified capital investment necessary to rehabilitate lands, this return had to be increased. Finding short-cuts in processing, though it may have

⁸⁰ Customs 5/1A, f. 31 recto, British Public Record Office.

⁸¹ Kenneth H. Beeson, "Indigo Production in the Eighteenth Century," *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 44 (1964): 218.

⁸² Thomas Spalding, "Observations and Extracts on the Manufacturing of *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 44 (1964): 218.

⁸³ U. B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery* (Baton Rouge, 1966, first published 1918), pp. 365-67.

⁸⁴ Thomas Spalding, "On the Culture of Sugar and Indigo," *The Southern Agriculturalist*, 1 (1828): 484.

lowered quality even further, and making hands responsible for greater acreages constituted one option. With increasing production by India and the inability of Carolina indigo to compete in the European market because of its poor quality, sales declined. This created an economic stress between declining return and rising outlay; with periodic crop failures, profits suffered even further. Prior to 1796, neither poor quality, competition from the Spanish and French West Indies, crop failures, nor rising overhead would have ended Carolina's industry. Their interaction, however, compounded by the great quantities of indigo produced by India and the absence of the bounty or some other artificial support to see the industry through this crucial period, proved devastating. It is doubtful that indigo could long have maintained its position as a Carolina staple, but its end perhaps would not have been so precipitous.

Conclusion

Carolina indigo had a poor reputation throughout its fifty-year history. This was due primarily to the indifference of processors and to the ineffectiveness of the Parliamentary bounty which awarded a premium to all rather than only high-quality indigo. The dye's poor quality perhaps put the Carolina product at a disadvantage in the European market during the 1750s, but increased demand by Britain and its low price nullified this failing and contributed to the crop's success in Carolina during the decade prior to the Revolution. In the 1790s, however, competition from India and other economic difficulties emphasized the product's poor quality. Its disadvantage in the market led to its disappearance from the Carolina economy by 1796.

Memorials

In memory of:

Miss Margaret Watson

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Mrs. Elizabeth Beattie Smith Dyke

Mrs. Margaret Hayne Harrison

Senator O. T. Wallace

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