



South Carolina's Story The making of a state

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In 1937, DuPont laboratories introduced nylon as a cheap replacement for silk.

For South Carolina, the introduction of the synthetic signaled the end of a quest for the establishment of a silk industry, or sericulture, that stretched back to the state's founding in 1670.

In 1671, there were visits by South Carolinians to Virginia to study the silk culture and to take mulberry trees back to Charleston. The early settlers found the white mulberry tree to be native to Virginia.

Twenty years later, Gov. Archdale proclaimed silk, along with indigo and cotton, to be acceptable in payment of taxes and debts. The cultivation of silk, indigo and cotton in those days required tedious labor, but it was the kind of labor that could be handled by women and children.

The only alternative crop in the early 1700s was rice, which was slow in being accepted. Cattle could be raised, but losses were heavy in Indian raids.

Also in the early 1700s, two colonies, one French and one Swiss, were established to develop separate silk industries. The 320-member Swiss colony settled on 40,000 acres on the Savannah River at Purysburg, and a 212-member French Huguenot refugee colony settled at New Bordeaux in Abbeville. Both enterprises failed, probably "because there were easier modes of making money," early records reveal.

Eliza Lucas Pinckney, best known for her experiments with indigo, also experimented with silk culture after her marriage in 1774. She supposedly wound the silk thread produced at "Belmont" and took with her to England three silk dresses she had made. The mother of George III received one as a gift and one, of "a shining gold brocade," was worn by Mrs. Pinckney when she was received at the Royal Palace.

Years later, Mrs. Pinckney's daughter, Harriott Pinckney Horry, then 81 years of age, wrote of her mother's making raw silk as her "favorite amusement." In an 1829 letter, Mrs. Horry wrote: "One of the ancient dresses of hers I still have — the Antiquity (sic) of its make is scarcely less a curiosity than its fabric — is made of silk having been spun before I was born."

Most of the early dyes used in the making of silk fabric came from the Carolina woods. Roots, barks, leaves, flower petals and berries furnished a rainbow of colors with poison ivy making the finest black. The brilliance, especially of reds and blues, made silk cloth worth its weight in gold.

During the 1830s there was a national rage for investing in mulberry trees. South Carolina shared in the mania with numerous plantings. Some groves were in sight of the state capital.

When a "rare" Oriental mulberry selling for one dollar per seedling proved to have no superiority over the native white mulberry, the bubble burst. For a half century, interest in silk culture lay dormant.

In 1901, agricultural interests in the U.S. Congress passed legislation which encouraged the revival of sericulture.

Henrietta Aiken Kelly, a native South Carolinian, who studied sericulture in Italy, was made a special agent to promote silk culture in the South.

Miss Kelly published a manual and secured several thousand mulberry trees for South Carolina. An Italian expert was engaged from the University of Turin.

Near Ladson, S.C., an Italian colony, called Ganzi, with 75 immigrants, planted more than 9,000 trees. At Beaufort, Japanese immigrants cared for about 4,000 trees.

A number of trees were planted at Bamberg and at Winthrop College. The experiment was abandoned within a year at Winthrop; the records do not reveal why.

These efforts were eagerly watched by Eastern silk manufacturers who periodically announced their intention of moving their plants to South Carolina. Apparently none ever did.

During World War I, the use of silk in the servicemen's uniforms created a high demand for the fiber.

After the war, the price of raw silk hit \$21 per pound. California, not South Carolina, became the center of efforts to produce commercial silk on a large scale. Again, sericulture in the United States could not compete with the cheap labor of the Orient where workers were willing to use their body heat to incubate the silkworm eggs.