Indigo
The Legendary Blue "Gold"

Story and Photography by Nancy McGregor.

South Carolina flag with May 2013 supermoon.

In June 2006, the United States Army decided to return to its "Class A" dress uniform. This marked a change from the standard Army Green to the more classic "Dress Blues." The changeover, expected to be complete by 2014, will offer a more striking look, but it's also following an older tradition. Blue symbolized the American color of liberty and freedom ever since the Continental Army first eschewed the red-dyed "lobster-back" uniforms of the British.

Of course, the Revolutionary War is well known for having a woefully undersupplied army. Soldiers were often cold, marching shoeless, and armed with whatever weapon they could find or fashion. The colonial militias dressed alike as best they could. It wasn't until 1777 that Congress allotted the finances for 30,000 ready-made uniforms from France that the uniforms for the revolutionaries became a reality. Benjamin Franklin and Silas Dean designed the first blue uniforms but things went awry when it came time for delivery. France had run into a shortage of blue wool and a portion of the order arrived in brown. These "less than snazzy" outfits were met with Colonial outrage and George Washington ended up holding a lottery to determine which states got the preferred color.

In South Carolina, however, uniforms had always been blue, but that would have surprised no one because the state was the production leader in natural indigo dye. What's more, the Colonel of 1st South Carolina Regiment was the son of Eliza Pinckney, the woman who had already created the legacy of the Lowcountry's Blue Gold.

In fact, the state flag of South Carolina was developed by one of her son's fellow soldiers, another Colonel in the Lowcountry's regiments. The flag harks back to those when Colonel William Moultrie of the 2nd Regiment chose a background of blue to match their indigo-colored uniforms. The crescent on the flag is said to be a gorget, worn on the hats of the soldiers. A gorget was originally the protective collar plate in a suit of medieval armor and as the battle armor faded from use, the crescent shape was retained as a mark of a warrior.

In his memoirs, Moultrie said: *"I was desired by the council of safety to have [a flag] made, upon which, as the state troops were clothed in blue, and the fort was garrisoned by the first and second regiments, who wore a silver crescent on the front of their caps; I had a large blue flag made with a crescent in the dexter [right] corner, to be in uniform with the troops. This was the first American flag which was displayed in South Carolina."* The palmetto tree was added a short time later to commemorate the fort made from the tree's logs on Sullivan's Island near Charles Town… or Charleston.

The color of those who dare to dream

Indigo dye, however, isn't native to the Lowcountry. It was grown and produced in Africa, Asia, and, of course, India, from whence it gets its name. One of the oldest natural dyes, the color was mentioned in manuscripts dating from the 4th century BC. The history of indigo is rife with romance, hope, industry, creativity, and determination.

Wherever you find the "color of the sky" in human history, there is where you find the stories of people who looked to the heavens and dared to dream. It seems that almost all of us have some connection to the color blue. Blue is the most popular color of social media websites and logos, along with most successful Internet brands. Blue is the color most preferred by men. Yet in earlier centuries, women wore blue far more often than pink and as such it was considered more feminine than pink. And today most of us a have a favorite pair of blue jeans, providing a connection with the color of natural indigo (the original riveted jeans made by Levi Strauss having been dyed with that deep blue).

Research has also shown that people are more productive in blue rooms. Blue, which calls to mind calmness or serenity, can also lower the pulse rate and body temperature. It is often described as peaceful, tranquil, secure, and orderly. And it is more often associated with prayer and mindful spirituality than any other color.

Over the centuries, Indigo has cut across all cultures to create an enduring story. It's the story of people who longed for the freedom to fly unfettered into a future of their own making.

1898 hand knitted doll depicting a Spanish-American soldier that the original owner had named Teddy Roosevelt.

Blue Silk coat belonging to Eliza Pinckney's son, Charles.

Eliza Lucas Pinckney's shoes.

Eliza Pinckney

In America, a portion of indigo's story belongs to a girl of 16. She was a girl who had the faith of her father and the legendary determination of the people in her time. No existing drawings of the girl have been confirmed but a pair of her shoes is on display at The Charleston Museum. The tiny high heels, made of silk and encrusted with silver braid, bear a label that says they were purchased from a shoemaker in London. They are delicate, feminine shoes that took their owner abroad and home again to the Lowcountry

Eliza Lucas was that girl. She was reared in exotic Antiqua in the British West Indies and she was educated in England. There, she excelled in the subject of botany for her father didn't care for women's needlepoint circles. He felt the ladies gossiped and a silly gaggle of gossips was not what he wanted for his daughter.

George, her father, moved the family to South Carolina when Eliza was 14 or 15 years old but the British government asked him to return to the islands. Eliza stayed behind. By the time she was 16, Eliza was running the three failing plantations that had belonged to her grandfather. After five years, the entire family returned to the West Indies except Eliza. She married Charles Pinckney and kept working the land.

Above left:
Early 19th century indigo embroidered coverlet

Above right:
Indigo dye with dipped textile

Following page:
Chunks of indigo brick

Eliza had begun by testing what crops would do well. She tried a number of things such as ginger, cotton, alfalfa, and cassava before decided that the indigo seeds sent by her father might be the cash crop she was seeking. A dedicated daughter, Eliza made notes and wrote letters, brisk and witty, regularly to her father. Eliza was also unusual for her time in the way she dealt with her slaves. Like all plantation owners in those days, she was dependent on her enslaved workers; however, Eliza who liked and admired them, taught them to read. Trusting their judgment, she relied on them for the success of her indigo crop.

Indigo must be grown from seed. Frost will kill it most winters, so the tiny seed pods must be gathered each year or there won't be a spring crop. Eliza's first tries were hampered by the cold and then by pests. She ended up with around 100 bushes and requested more seed from her father, who was still in the Caribbean. Finding a skilled dye maker to head the process of turning a harvest into the dried cakes of dye presented another problem. Her first indigo maker was a man named Nicholas Cromwell who sabotaged her efforts by adding too much lime to the fermentation. He was a Frenchman who didn't want America to compete with France's indigo producers. Undaunted, Eliza persevered and shared her seeds with her neighbor. Eventually her persistence paid off. It wasn't long before the Blue Gold had topped rice as the number one cash crop. By the start of the American Revolution, small bricks of indigo had replaced paper currency in South Carolina, which by then was exporting over a million pounds of indigo to Europe, thus earning its designation of Blue Gold.

On average, two acres of indigo plants would produce over 40 pounds of the dried cakes— enough dye to color around 3,000 garments. The process for creating the cakes of blue dye is fairly simply but labor intensive. The plants are cut and packed into water filled vats where they are allowed to ferment. Eliza's notes indicate it was a smelly process that drew flies and insects. The water turns yellow and is then agitated until the color becomes green, then blue. After the indigo is allowed to settle to the bottom, the liquid is drawn off and the pulp is boiled to remove impurities, filtered, and pressed to remove moisture. Finally, it is cut into bricks and air-dried.

Indigo leaves and indigo dye

Indigo, however, existed long before Eliza. The stories of the dye and the cloth are woven with tales of magic and spiritualism. For centuries, it was the only blue dye available and along with its reverence and enchantment came wars, greed, human bondage, and hints of evil magic. Some processes used to create different shades were found to be toxic and deaths were common, rendering a darker shade to the history.

Indigo, for some people was simply a color, but for others, it became a livelihood that merged into the voice of politics. Still others saw indigo as the last of a rapidly vanishing past; yet, others found an astounding art medium that fostered the birth of masterpieces.

In fact, it almost became a lost art when the production of synthetic indigo ended much of the natural growth and production of the indigo harvests. With that came the demise of the livelihoods of many different cultures. Today in small pockets all over the world, however, indigo is reemerging. *Blue Alchemy: Stories of Indigo*, a documentary by Mary Lance tells the history of that blue gold. During her filming, Mary found a resurgence in the natural processes as grassroots efforts reach out to villages and family growers in many counties. Natural dyes and processes are now replacing the chemical synthetics. Indigo's story is still being told.

In America, Eliza's story came to an end in 1793 when she was 71. So great had been her contributions that General George Washington requested to be one of her pallbearers. In 1989, she was again recognized for her outstanding contributions, becoming the first woman inducted into the South Carolina Business Hall of Fame. So, when you have the honor to see one of our service men or women in their dress blues, remember the determination of a young girl of 16 and the spirit of those who reach for the sky.

For More Information:

Coastal Discovery Museum at Honey Horn. Indigo is grown in the Heritage Garden.

70 Honey Horn Drive. Hilton Head Island, S.C. 29926 843.689.6767 coastaldiscovery.org

The Charleston Museum 360 Meeting St., Charleston. 843.722. 2996 charlestonmuseum.org

Blue Alchemy: Stories of Indigo Documentary by Mary Lance bluealchemyindigo.com

A one-woman, historical presentations on Eliza Lucas Pinckney by living history interpreter Peggy Pickett 843.815.5311