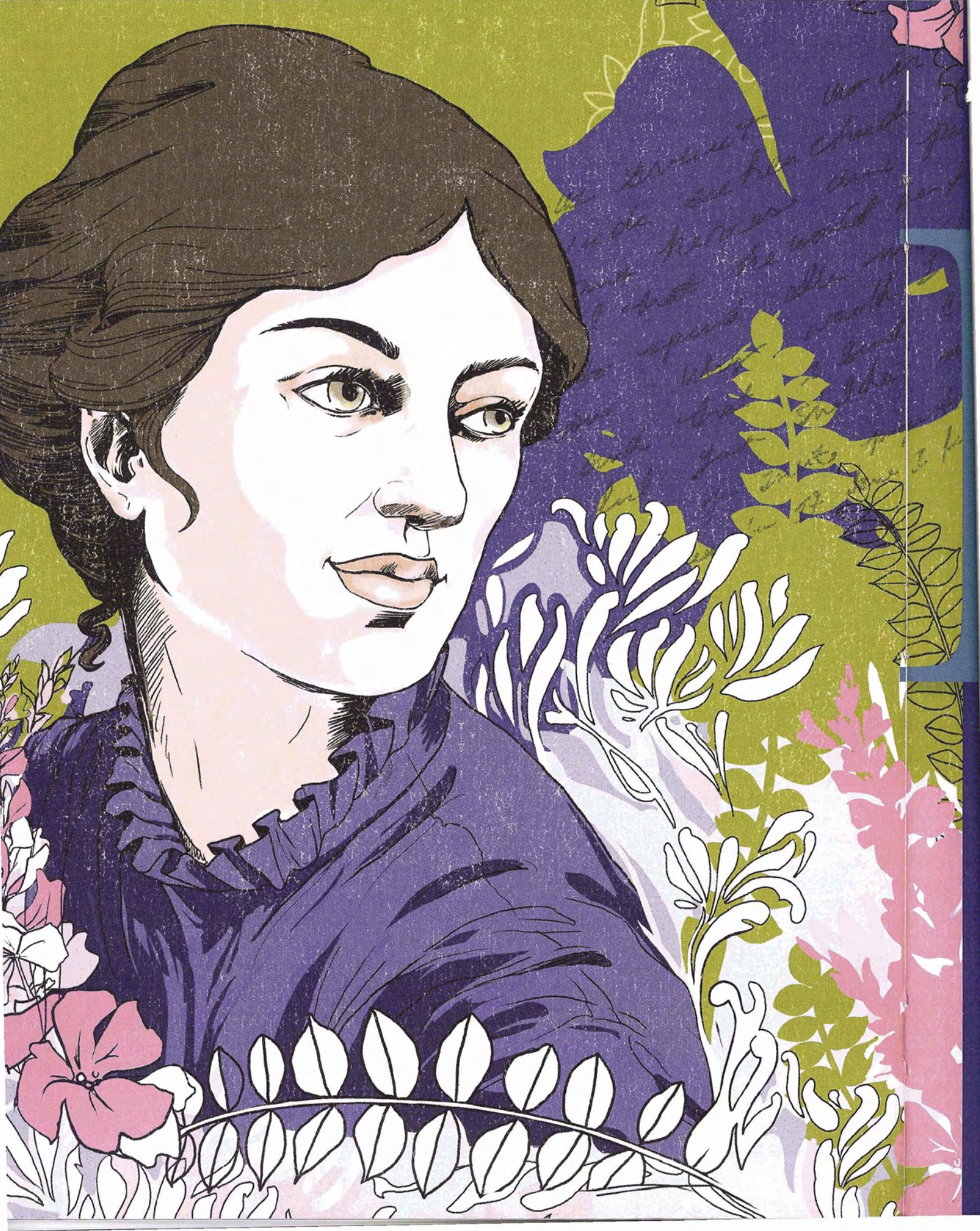

Eliza Pinckney's

Indigo world

By Nadine Goff

Illustration by Zela Lobb

Unlike most Colonial women, who left few traces of their daily lives, Eliza Lucas Pinckney copied many of the letters she wrote into a long parchment-covered book that survived floods, wars and fires. She may have copied some of the letters in case the ships carrying them to her father in Antigua or to her friends and family in England fell into enemy hands, in which case she could send a duplicate one. There is no obvious reason, however, why she would have also copied her letters to friends in Charles Town, S.C., (later Charleston), a mere 17 miles away. We can only be thankful she did.

Today, Pinckney's letters, which her great-great-granddaughter, Harriet Horry Ravenel, wrote in 1896, "were literally 'plucked as a brand from the burning' by one pious descendant," provide a wealth of knowledge about this remarkable woman.

Eliza Lucas Pinckney's sons, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney and Thomas Pinckney, served as officers in the Revolutionary War. Charles, a delegate from South Carolina to the national Constitutional Convention in 1787, was a signer of the Constitution. Before she assumed the roles of wife and mother, however, Eliza was an extraordinarily accomplished woman in her own right.

The Birth of a Colonial Businesswoman

Born in the West Indies in 1722, Eliza was the daughter of Lieutenant Colonel George Lucas, an officer in the English army, and his wife, of whom little is known. In 1738, during a time when hostilities in the war between England and Spain had ceased, Lt. Col. Lucas, who had been stationed in Antigua, moved his wife and two daughters, Eliza and Mary, to South Carolina, while his two sons, George Jr. and Thomas, attended school in England. When negotiations with Spain broke off, he had to return to Antigua. His wife was in poor health, so he left his daughter Eliza in charge of all his affairs in Carolina, including Wappo, his 600-acre plantation with "20 able-bodied slaves" located near Charleston.

Well-traveled and educated, Eliza had little interest in abandoning her responsibility to her family farm, which she wrote in May 1740 to a friend in England, "requires much writing and more business and fatigue of other sorts than you can imagine." Earlier that year, she told her father that she was not interested in marrying either of the two men whose names he had put forward. Of one, she wrote, "... the riches of Peru and Chili [sic] if he do put them together could not purchase a sufficient Esteem for him to make him my husband."

That same year, she began experimenting with indigo plants, eventually perfecting a method of preparing blocks of indigo that could be turned into a high-quality dye avidly sought after by European cloth manufacturers. As a result of her efforts, indigo became an important cash crop in Colonial South Carolina from 1740 to 1790.

INDIGO PLANTATION This 18th-century French line engraving shows slaves working on an indigo plantation in the West Indies. Fresh water in a series of leaching vats extracts the dye from the plant.

THE GRANGER COLLECTION, NEW YORK

{Indigo} From India to the Americas

Indigo, with its distinctive blue color, is one of the oldest and most widely used textile dyes in the world. It was native to India, the most ancient center of blue dyeing in the world. By 450 B.C., small quantities of it had reached the Mediterranean countries. After Vasco da Gama discovered a sea route to India in 1498, indigo became an increasingly important and valuable commodity in Europe.

Although some varieties of indigo were indigenous to the woods and swamps of South Carolina, they did not produce a good dye. Carolina planters preferred the species *Indigofera tinctoria*, more commonly called the "Bahama."

Planting, cultivating, harvesting and processing indigo was very labor-intensive. In South Carolina during the Colonial era, slaves performed most of the work.

Indigo seeds were planted in furrowed trenches; the first sprouts appeared in 10 to 14 days. About three months after the sprouts appeared, the indigo reached full bloom and was ready for harvest. The long, unpleasant task of processing began after the plants were harvested.

In "The Indigo Bonanza in South Carolina, 1740–90," published in *Technology and Culture*, G. Terry Sharrer writes that, "The dye did not exist as such in the plant, but was formed in a chemical process which the planters followed without fully understanding."

The plants were first placed in a "steeper vat" covered with water and allowed to ferment for 10 to 14 hours. The fermented plants made a putrid stink that attracted hordes of flies. The liquid created by the fermentation was drained into a second vat called the "battery," and the rotted plants were spread in fields to dry.

Slaves beat the yellowish water in the "battery" with hand paddles until blue specks appeared, at which point some planters added limewater to speed up the oxidation process. When the liquid finally turned fluorescent blue, beating ceased, and the sediment was allowed to subside for eight to 10 hours. Then slaves slowly drained off the water, until all that remained was the rich, blue indigo mud. It was scooped into linen bags and hung in the shade to dry. The "fine stiff paste" in the bags was then removed, cut into small, square cakes and then packed into barrels for shipping to Europe.

By 1757, exports of South Carolina indigo rose to 876,000 pounds. In 1775, however, the Continental Congress prohibited further exports to England. During the Revolutionary War, fighting destroyed many indigo plantations. By 1800, dye exports fell to 3,400 pounds. Another factor contributing to the demise of indigo was Eli Whitney's invention in 1793 of the cotton gin, which stimulated a new cash crop industry.

Today, indigo is primarily used to dye the denim cloth used in blue jeans. However, unlike the natural vegetable indigo dye produced in South Carolina in the 18th century, the indigo dye used today is a synthetic aniline dye. —N.G.

Cultivating a Cash Crop

By 1742, after several attempts to grow the plant, Eliza's third crop was successful. Her father, by then governor of Antigua, sent a man named Cromwell from the island of Montserrat to help her manufacture dye from the plants. Cromwell tried to keep the process a mystery, but Eliza and her neighbor, Andrew Deveaux, observed him and improved upon his methods.

In May 1744, Eliza Lucas married Charles Pinckney, a widower more than two decades older. Pinckney took her standing indigo crop as a partial dowry. She later reported that her husband saved the crop for seed, which he distributed to a great number of people. In October 1744, an article in the *South Carolina Gazette* written by "Agricola," a pen name used by Charles Pinckney, urged farmers to cut their acreages of rice because the profits were so low and instead try other commercial crops such as indigo. He wrote that "we are sure from some late Experiments that the West India Plant grows here as kindly and well and produces as good INDIGO as it doth in the French Islands."

INDIGO PLANT. A 1799 English engraving of *Indigofera angustifolia*, or narrow-leaved indigo. See page 25 for more on the dyeing process.

In addition to cultivating her family's indigo plants, Eliza Lucas Pinckney gave birth to four children: Charles Cotesworth, born in 1746; George Lucas, born in 1747, who died soon after; Harriott, born in 1749; and Thomas, born in 1750. During this time, she also experimented with the cultivation of silk. The result was enough raw silk to make three dresses, which she commissioned while the family was living in England from 1752 to 1758.

In March 1758, the Pinckneys left their two sons at school in England and returned to South Carolina with their daughter. On July 18, 1758, Charles Pinckney died after an illness of three weeks. A widow at 36, Eliza once again drew upon her unusual knowledge and love of agriculture to manage her husband's property. She continued to write to friends and relatives for a number of years, but her letterbook entries ceased in 1762, so most of what we know of her life after that time is based on information supplied by others.

Raising Revolutionaries

Although her father and brother had served in King George's army, Eliza's sons were Revolutionary Patriots. According to Ravenel's biography of Eliza Lucas Pinckney, "She never set herself against her sons, or against that sentence in her husband's will which had enjoined each of them to devote 'all his future abilities to the service of God and his Country, and in the cause of virtuous liberty.' "

"Long before the end of the war," Ravenel wrote, "she found her reward for this early forbearance. Her sympathies centered themselves in the cause for which her sons were fighting and their country became entirely her own."

In 1791, when General George Washington was on his southern tour, he stopped at Hampton plantation in South Carolina where Eliza was living with her daughter Harriott and Harriott's husband, Daniel Horry. The ladies greeted Washington wearing sashes and bandeaux with the general's portrait and mottoes of welcome, and Gen. Washington dined upon an elaborate breakfast.

Two years later, when Eliza Lucas Pinckney died in Philadelphia on May 27, 1793, Gen. Washington, at his own request, served as one of the pallbearers at her funeral.

In 1989, more than 260 years after she was born, Eliza became the first woman inducted into the South Carolina Business Hall of Fame.

Nadine Goff is a freelance writer in Madison, Wis.