

5-2-2018

Early Republican Motherhood Through Eliza Pinckney

Taylor V. Wilkins

Harding University, twilkin3@harding.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.harding.edu/tenor>

 Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wilkins, Taylor V. (2018) "Early Republican Motherhood Through Eliza Pinckney," *Tenor of Our Times*: Vol. 7, Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.harding.edu/tenor/vol7/iss1/10>

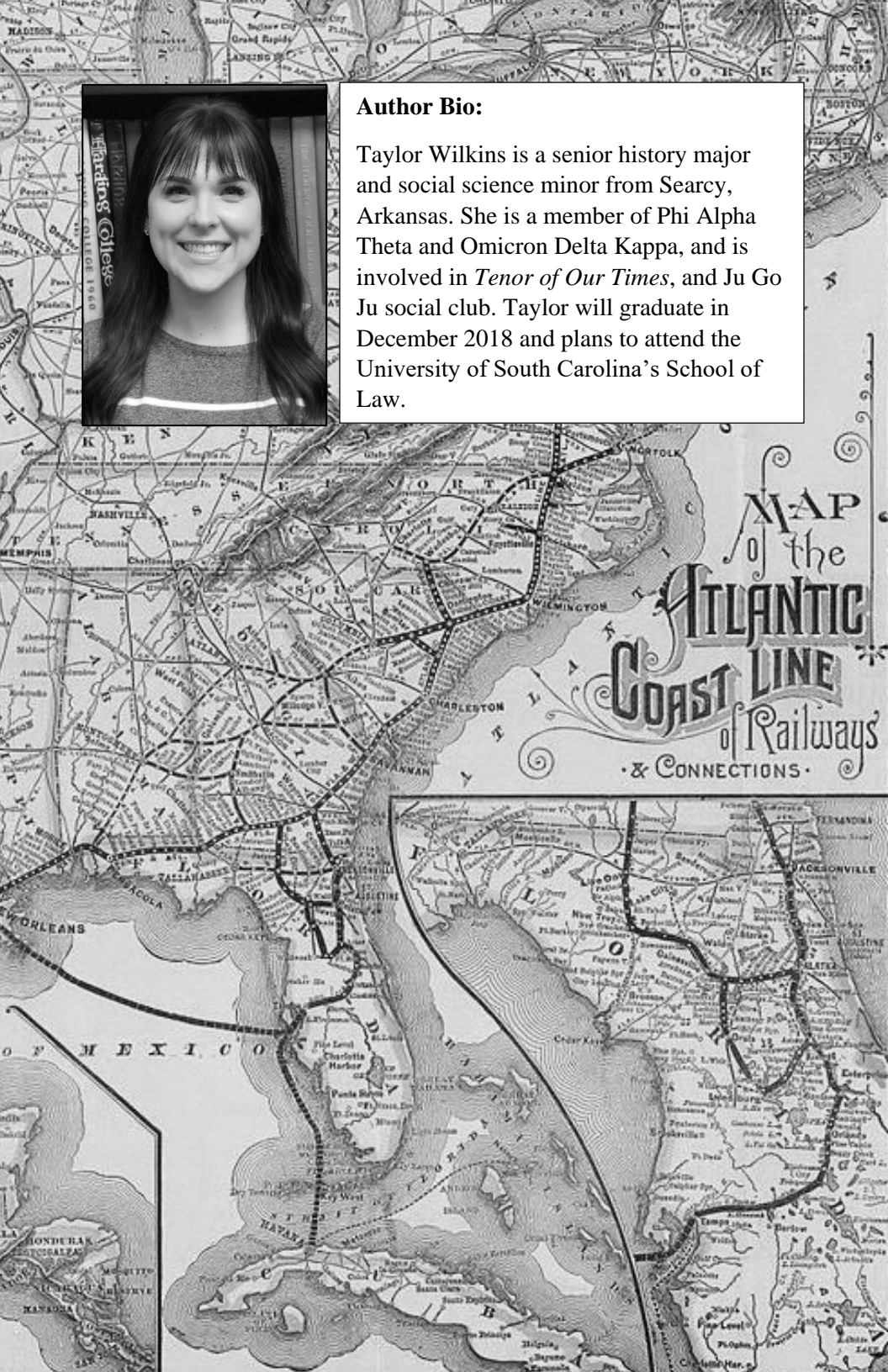
This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts & Humanities at Scholar Works at Harding. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Tenor of Our Times* by an authorized editor of Scholar Works at Harding. For more information, please contact scholarworks@harding.edu.





Author Bio:

Taylor Wilkins is a senior history major and social science minor from Searcy, Arkansas. She is a member of Phi Alpha Theta and Omicron Delta Kappa, and is involved in *Tenor of Our Times*, and Ju Go Ju social club. Taylor will graduate in December 2018 and plans to attend the University of South Carolina's School of Law.



EARLY REPUBLICAN MOTHERHOOD IN THE LIFE OF ELIZA PINCKNEY

By Taylor Wilkins

Elizabeth Lucas Pinckney was the exception to many social norms of the 18th century, and has been praised over the decades for her life's work. She pioneered planting techniques and natural remedies, as well as kept a letter book that detailed her life, and raised children who also played key roles in the formation of the United States. The Enlightenment informed much of the philosophical thought in Pinckney's time. Among the many changes in thought that the Enlightenment inspired, the most influential in Pinckney's life was a drastic social change within women's roles as men began to see more importance in the opposite sex. Philosophers latched on to this new idea and wanted to explore what it meant for the future of society. Charles-Louis de Secondat, known as Montesquieu, was a prominent philosopher of the early 18th century. He related the state of women's rights to the state of a government system. If women had more freedom within society, then the government most likely supported freedom of the people.¹ John Locke, another notable philosopher of the early 18th century, wrote about the woman's role in politics and the economy. He believed women had power within the domestic arena. This involved contributing to their children's lives, owning their own property, and earning respect apart from that of their husband. Locke's work, *Two Treatises of Government*, touches on the subject of women's domestic rights. He writes that "nobody can deny but that the woman hath an equal share, if not the greater," in raising children, as she was the one who gave birth and nurtured them as they grew; however, he comes to the conclusion that the parents should still share equal rights because the child is part of each of them.²

¹ Linda Kerber, "The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment-An American Perspective," *American Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (Summer 1976): 190-191.

² John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963): 55.

This movement led to the concept of Republican Motherhood. The concept “preserved traditional gender roles at the same time that it carved out a new, political role for women.” This meant that women found their political roles indirectly through educating their children. By teaching their children from a woman’s perspective, mothers passed on their ideas on politics and society to their children. Their teachings would then raise sons and daughters with the mindset that women can possess knowledge and power, too. Since this indirect political role was located within the home, it was considered acceptable and necessary at the time in order for children to grow up and be strong, educated citizens.³ Pinckney’s letter books, along with accomplishments as a mother and botanist created a lifestyle and mindset that helped advance the idea of Republican Motherhood that flowed throughout the post-revolutionary era in the United States

Elizabeth “Eliza” Lucas was born to English planter George Lucas and his wife, Ann Mildrum, on December 28, 1722, in Antigua, West Indies. The Lucas family owned one of the largest sugar plantations on the island. Pinckney was very close to her father, and he desired for her to be properly educated, so she was sent to boarding school in England. There, her fascination with botany began. Her father encouraged her in her studies and let her tend to their family plantation, starting in 1738, when she was only sixteen. Soon after, her family moved to South Carolina in order to stay out of mounting debt. This move provided more opportunity for her as a woman, because as the American colonies began to grow and improve, women were able to play an increasingly larger role in society.⁴ Though colonial women were still expected to stay within their private domain as housewives and mothers, women began to find their place in politics within their domestic sphere.⁵

While Republican Motherhood focused on the power of women, the belief that the man was the leader is maintained. Pinckney demonstrated this through scolding her grandson, Daniel Horry, for poor

³ Rosemarie Zagari, “Moral, Manners, and the Republican Mother,” *American Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (June, 1992): 192.

⁴ Harriet Simons Williams, “Eliza Lucas and Her Family,” *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 99, no. 3 (July 1998): 260-262.

⁵ Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980): 7.

orthography. She declared that for a woman “to be greatly deficient in this matter is almost inexcusable,” but for a man to be deficient is “unpardonable.”⁶ Her conventional beliefs in education seemed to be that a woman can and should be intelligent and literate; however, the man was still to be the superior of the sexes, outright in the political and educational scene, while the woman stayed within the home

Pinckney’s attitude towards women and education stemmed from her family’s support throughout her education. In 1744, Pinckney wrote her father of how grateful she was for her education, and that she hoped he would “acknowledge particularly my obligation to you for the pains and money you laid out in my education, which I esteem a more valuable fortune than any you could now have given me.”⁷ Because she had a father that believed in her abilities and pushed her to pursue her passion in agriculture, Eliza was able to have opportunities that many girls of her age and time did not have.

When she was seventeen, Pinckney’s father entrusted her with the family’s 5,000 acres of land and eighty-six slaves and employees in the colony.⁸ While it was hard work for the young girl, Pinckney succeeded in her new responsibilities. In 1740, she would write to her friend, Mrs. Mary Steer Boddicott, “I think myself happy that can be useful to so good a father,” and that it took “rising very early” to be able to “go through much business” about the plantation. Pinckney tells Boddicott that while the work is hard, being able to do the work makes her incredibly happy.⁹

While managing the estate, Pinckney did botanical research and took care farming her silkworms. Her work was highly productive and

⁶ Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America*, 191-192.

⁷ Eliza Lucas Pinckney to George Lucas, 2 May 1744, *The Papers of Eliza Lucas Pinckney and Harriott Pinckney Horry Digital Edition*, ed. Constance Schulz, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2012): <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/PinckneyHorry/ELP0816> (accessed 2 Dec. 2017).

⁸ Sam S. Baskett, “Eliza Lucas Pinckney: Portrait of an Eighteenth Century American,” *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 72, no. 4 (Oct. 1971): 209-210.

⁹ Eliza Lucas Pinckney to Mary Steer (Mrs. Richard) Boddicott, 2 May 1740, in *The Papers of Eliza Lucas Pinckney and Harriott Pinckney Horry Digital Edition*, ed. Constance Schulz, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2012): <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/PinckneyHorry/ELP0152> (accessed 2 Dec. 2017).

so high quality that she was able to produce fine enough silk to be presented to George III and his mother, Princess Augusta.¹⁰ Along with the silkworms, she also tended to a fig orchard and grew ginger, cotton, alfalfa, cassava, and indigo.¹¹ Pinckney's largest agricultural accomplishment lies in her indigo research and production. While she was not the first to make an attempt, she is credited with being the first to successfully develop a strain of indigo that was able to be grown in the soil of North America. The success was due to Pinckney's extensive research on the indigo seeds, as well as the production methods of indigo. With the help of her slaves, who had experience in the industry, and her neighbor, Andrew Deveaux, she was able to produce seventeen pounds of indigo and enough seeds to give to her neighbors. Her indigo continued to thrive and she was soon shipping it to England, as well as around the colonies. With the French and Indian War creating tensions between the colonies and the European continent, indigo shipments had decreased; however, by developing indigo that not only survived, but thrived in the South Carolinian soil, Pinckney was able to change the economy of the colonies. At the peak production of indigo in 1775, over one million pounds were shipped out of South Carolina, which produced a prosperous economy in South Carolina and gave the colonies a new staple crop.¹²

Pinckney was able to enjoy the pleasure of pursuing her agricultural experiments without making her research a scandal by stepping out of her place as a woman; rather, she did so by simply pursuing her studies and doing her duty as a good daughter. Since Pinckney was within the domain of her home, she seemed to comply along the lines of the social standards expected of her. She never seemed to aim for making a brazen political statement with her work; instead, Pinckney saw what she was doing as an act of her dedication to her

¹⁰ Baskett, 209-210.

¹¹ Constance B. Schulz, *South Carolina Women: Their Lives and Times* (University of Georgia Press, 2009): 85.

¹² *Ibid.*, 85-86.

family that was not only within her domain as a woman, but was also her duty as a daughter to her father.¹³

Eliza married Charles Pinckney on May 27, 1744.¹⁴ Like other colonial women, she was under the act of coverture upon marriage. This meant that all of Pinckney's property became her husband's and she had no real political or economic rights. In coverture, the man was to be superior to his wife in every way, though this not seen as a negative practice.¹⁵ Essentially, Pinckney's identity would have been "covered" by her husband's.¹⁶ However, Pinckney's husband had a more republican mindset, and he encouraged her to work hard and do what made her happy.¹⁷

Once she married, Pinckney became a mother to three children, Charles Cotesworth, Harriott, and Thomas. At this time, her husband also became involved in South Carolinian colonial politics.¹⁸ Once she began to settle into her new role as a wife, began to refer to herself as American instead of British. In 1753, she and Charles moved their family to England. There, they met the future King George III and his family. When introducing herself, she identified herself as an American, and spoke well of life in the colonies. This marked an important change in Pinckney's thought, since she had been born to English plantation owners and had grown up in traditional colonial English fashion. Her decision to refer to herself as an American would eventually come to have a tremendous effect upon her children, as well.¹⁹

Unfortunately, Charles Sr. fell ill in 1758, and he died shortly after the Pinckney's returned from England. Pinckney was then left to tend to her three children and her husband's estate. She remained strong and stayed socially active, while continuing to maintain her husband's Belmont and Auckland plantations, Pinckney Island, and two 500-acre

¹³ Darcy R. Fryer, "The Mind of Eliza Pinckney: An Eighteenth-Century Woman's Construction of Herself," *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 99, no. 3 (July 1993): 211.

¹⁴ Baskett, 212-213.

¹⁵ Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America*, 9.

¹⁶ Kerber, 120.

¹⁷ Fryer, 216.

¹⁸ Baskett, 213.

¹⁹ Schulz, *South Carolina Women: Their Lives and Times*, 91-92.

properties, along with two town houses and various other land holdings.²⁰ When she arrived at the Belmont plantation, she found it in complete disarray. Named an executor of her husband's will, she dutifully restored the plantation to a lively, productive estate.²¹ While it would not have been common for a woman to be in charge of such land on her own, Pinckney's unique situation allowed her to own and oversee the land without issue, and her education and previous experience from running her father's plantation ensured that she was more than capable.²² Her ability to rise to the occasion and take upon herself such a large undertaking is reminiscent of the Republican Motherhood spirit. She was following the orders of her husband in his will. However, she still went above and beyond to ensure that their estate and family were well taken care of.

Pinckney's legacy does not only affect the colonies through her indigo planting and land holdings. Her perseverance as a mother and determination to raise her children to be educated, prosperous citizens resulted in her children becoming notable individuals of the early American republic. When Charles Cotesworth was born, Pinckney and her husband did all they could to ensure that he would be educated. Pinckney worked so diligently with him that he was able to spell by the time he was two years old. Her dedication as a young mother to her son's education is a prime example of how important she felt education was. As a devout Christian, Pinckney also placed a strong emphasis on reading the Bible and going to worship. Her emphasis on her children's spiritual lives would later make a profound effect on Charles through his adult life as well. After Charles Sr. died, Pinckney also made sure to encourage her son to take upon his role as the man of the family. Pinckney was able to remain strong and take care of her family after her husband's death. Though she had the ability, she encouraged Charles to assume his new role as patriarch of the family.²³

²⁰ Fryer, 216.

²¹ Schulz, *South Carolina Women: Their Lives and Times*, 93.

²² *Ibid.*, 79-81.

²³ Marvin R. Zahniser, *Charles Cotesworth Pinckney: Founding Father*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967): 8-11.

Thomas, the youngest brother, was known as “the little rebel” due to his fervor for American independence. When the Revolutionary War broke out, Thomas was quick to join.²⁴ During his war years, he diligently wrote to his mother and sister. His letters show his devotion to the women, as he promised Harriott that he would continue writing her, even when he had nothing to really write about. The content of his letters is also telling of how he respected his mother and sister as educated women. He enjoyed the women’s interest in the war and gave them information on the battles and what he was experiencing. His letters not only display the respect and work ethic he was raised with, but also show that he held his mother and sister in high intellectual regard.²⁵

Pinckney’s only daughter, Harriott, chose to follow close to her mother’s footsteps, and became interested in botany and tending to the plantation. She married a planter, Daniel Horry, and continued to keep detailed letter books like her mother did before her. In correspondence with her daughter’s husband, Pinckney discusses how she is happy that the two are well suited for each other. She also notes that Harriott’s “management of a dairy is an amusement she has always been fond of, and ’tis a very useful one,” and that she “looks well to the ways of her household” and “will not eat the bread of Idleness while she is able to do otherwise,” which is very reminiscent of Pinckney herself.²⁶

Harriott’s life was also very reminiscent of her mother’s. Unfortunately, Harriott also became a widow as a young mother. Like her mother, she was then entrusted to look after her late husband’s estate. Because she had been educated in agriculture, her plantation thrived. A notable visitor to her plantation was the president, George Washington, when he was on a tour of the South. Pinckney’s influence on her daughter undoubtedly shaped Harriott into becoming a strong woman like her. This led to Harriott becoming a post-revolutionary Republican

²⁴ Baskett, 217.

²⁵ Jack L. Cross and Thomas Pinckney, "Letters of Thomas Pinckney, 1775-1780 (Continued)," *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 58, no. 2 (April, 1957): 70-71.

²⁶ Elise Pinckney and Eliza Lucas Pinckney, "Letter of Eliza Lucas Pinckney, 1768-1782," *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 76, no. 3 (1975): 143-144.

Mother who would continue to help shape the social and political atmosphere for women in the young country.²⁷

While she made lasting discoveries in agriculture and her children would go on to become prominent citizens of the new American republic, one of Pinckney's most notable contributions to history is through her letter books. She was diligent in keeping records of different transactions, copies of her letters, as well as and other important manuscripts. Because of the letter book, historians are now able to have a detailed look into the life of an elite, well-educated, colonial woman. Her collection spans over two generations, as Harriott continued the practice as well.²⁸

Among the papers are travel journals, recipes, and homemade remedies. The recipes touch on everything from boiling rice to how to make a cake. These recipes provide an idea of what meals might be served at the time, as well as what food was available in the colonies at the time. Her home remedies also have a wide range of topics, from making hair grow to healing "gout in the stomach." The home remedies also demonstrate more of her research through botany, but they also provide an interesting insight into what ailments typically plagued people of her time and what medical care was available.²⁹

Harriott's cookbook and household information also provides an idea of what a Southern plantation wife might cook. In addition, it provides a contrast to the state of an American household before and after the Revolutionary War by comparing what they ate and needed for medical treatments. The books show how large Pinckney's influence on her daughter was, as she desired to continue the legacy of her mother through writing. Harriott's letter book confirms that her mother was successful in educating her daughter, as well. The volume of letters written and people she corresponded with shows that she was socially active and a well-educated woman who wished to be informed of what was happening in the world around her.³⁰

²⁷ Schulz, *South Carolina Women: Their Lives and Times*, 81-83.

²⁸ Constance Schulz, ed., *The Papers of Eliza Lucas Pinckney and Harriott Pinckney Horry: Digital Edition*, (The University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2012).

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Schulz, *The Papers of Eliza Lucas Pinckney and Harriott Pinckney Horry*.

The letter book also details information from Pinckney's sons during the war. For most of the war, Thomas wrote to Harriott, while Charles wrote to his mother so that they might stay updated on each other. In one letter on May 17, 1779, Pinckney writes to Thomas that "independence is all" she wished for. Her support of her sons in the war is very reflective of a Republican Mother.³¹ In letters during the war, Pinckney and Harriott refer to the British as "the enemy," which is further proof that she has separated herself from her English upbringing and taken on the American identity.³² Though she was not born in the colonies and did not come to South Carolina until she was a teenager, she clearly shows hope for a new country and support for her republican-minded sons who were fighting a war against her native country.

Another way Pinckney demonstrates aspects of Republican Motherhood is through her wartime efforts to help the colonies. In her letter book, she has a record of a notice from the Treasury that they received her loan to the state. This loan, totaling £4,000, would have been a very large sum to give as a widow, especially during the war; however, Pinckney's diligence in her work on the plantation, as well as dedicated sons, would have helped her stay financially secure. The money also shows a more physical example of how she was dedicated to the republican cause of the colonies, desiring to help the young country for her posterity to enjoy the freedoms it would bring.³³

Shortly after she married, Pinckney made several resolutions to herself. These resolutions all pertain to her friends, family, and God. She "resolved to be a good mother" and to "root out the first appearing and budding of vice, and to instill piety" in her children. She also

³¹ Eliza Lucas Pinckney to Thomas Pinckney, 17 May 1779, *The Papers of Eliza Lucas Pinckney and Harriott Pinckney Horry Digital Edition*, ed. Constance Schulz, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2012): <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/PinckneyHorry/ELP0967> (accessed 4 Dec. 2017).

³² Harriott Pinckney Horry to Eliza Lucas Pinckney, 30 December 1778, *The Papers of Eliza Lucas Pinckney and Harriott Pinckney Horry Digital Edition*, ed. Constance Schulz, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2012): <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/PinckneyHorry/ELP0310> (accessed 6 Dec. 2017).

³³ Eliza Lucas Pinckney, Accounts Audited of Claims Growing out of the Revolution, 8 October 1779, in *The Papers of Eliza Lucas Pinckney and Harriott Pinckney Horry Digital Edition*, ed. Constance Schulz, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2012): <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/PinckneyHorry/ELP1227> (1 Dec. 2017).

resolves to be mindful of her husband's reputation and interests, and to "study to please him." These resolutions show the more sensitive, motherly side of Pinckney, however, she makes a point to ensure she cultivates her children's minds correctly, because she knows that it is her duty to raise them right. Her language when talking about her husband is also of love. However, Pinckney also realized the importance of a social life and reputation.³⁴

After Pinckney's children had grown, she busied herself with her grandchildren, particularly Harriott's son, Daniel Horry. Horry had taken a liking to English life, which Pinckney blatantly disliked. She desired for Horry to take after his uncles and become a prominent citizen and promoter of American liberty. She went as far as to write him a letter in 1787 where she mentions that she sent the new Constitution to him, reminding him of his family in America, most notably, his Uncle Charles Cotesworth, who helped draft the Constitution. While Horry never came back to the United States, Pinckney still always desired for him to have some affection towards his birth country.³⁵

Pinckney died on May 26th, 1793 at the age of seventy after a year of fighting breast cancer. At the time, her sons were fulfilling their duties to their country. Thomas was the American minister to Great Britain, and Charles Cotesworth was the minister to France. Both men were highly respected and would later be put on tickets for vice-president and president. While her sons were not able to be with her at the time of her death, they still fulfilled Pinckney's wish for them by being leaders for their country.³⁶

Pinckney was hailed in the *Charlestown City Gazette* as an "accomplished lady, possessed, in a most eminent degree, all the amiable and engaging qualities, united to all the virtues and graces which embellish and exalt the female character." She was held so highly as a mother to the new nation that George Washington was a pallbearer at her funeral. It was his request to do so in gratitude for all she accomplished on her estate, making her "the matriarch of one of the first families of the

³⁴ Schulz, *South Carolina Women: Their Lives and Times*, 89.

³⁵ Baskett, 218.

³⁶ Schulz, *South Carolina Women: Their Lives and Times*, 101-102.

new nation,” and for raising sons who were faithful leaders of the new nation, as well.³⁷

Some historians argue that Pinckney was never a true Republican Mother because she was active mainly before the Revolutionary War. According to Constance B. Schulz in her work *South Carolina Women: Their Lives and Times*, several notable historians have tried to characterize Pinckney as almost anything but a Republican Mother. One of these other characterizations is a “Deputy Husband,” a woman who took upon the responsibilities of her husband when he was no longer able. While this would apply to Pinckney, she took care of the plantation before her husband died, and even before marriage by helping her father. Another term used is a “Kin Specialist.” This refers to an elite colonial woman who found her place in the family by taking upon some type of domestic work. The term is ill-fitting for two reasons. The first reason would be that Pinckney’s agricultural work was more than a pastime. Through her dedicated studies and research, she invented a new strain of indigo, which takes more dedication than a simple past time. Second, Pinckney certainly helped take care of her family through her work, but she also made it her goal to cultivate the hearts and minds of her children towards republican ideals, so her job as a mother extended past simply helping out the family estate. Another term applied to Pinckney is a modified example of Republican Motherhood, coined “Republican Womanhood.” However, the “Republican Womanhood” seems to play a larger role in the relationship between a husband and wife, rather than a mother and her children. While this term certainly would apply to her as well, Pinckney’s husband died while she was young, and her dedication as a mother was overwhelmingly prominent in her life and legacy to be considered anything less than a Republican Mother.³⁸

While her intention was not to be remembered for pushing the boundaries social norms, Pinckney’s example of Republican Motherhood provided an example for many women that came after her. Her agricultural accomplishments made her family prosperous and well

³⁷ Baskett, 219.

³⁸ Schulz, *South Carolina Women: Their Lives and Times*, 82-83.

known, while her influence on her children also influenced the young United States of America.³⁹ Her sons' desires to be leaders and promote the republic no doubt came from having an independent mother who believed in educating her children to be so. Through their political activism, they helped create the young United States into the powerful nation it is today, as well as give her a name for being the mother that taught them their republican values.⁴⁰ Pinckney's influence on her daughter's life, not only through promoting an interest in plantation life, but through the encouragement to be an educated mother and wife, led Harriott to keep her very detailed letter books. These letter books continued her mother's steps and provided an interesting insight into the life of a post-revolution woman, as well as a contrast to her mother's life. Pinckney's own letter books provide the best insight to what she thought and how she did all she accomplished.

While some historians wish to categorize Pinckney as a pre-revolutionary woman, excluding her from Republican Motherhood, it is evident that throughout her life, she exuded her confidence, education, and determination to do all she could to make the world a better place. In turn, these values resulted in her raising children who were confident, educated, and willing to bring independence to a new nation. Though she was not raising her children after the Revolution, her legacy makes her a Republican Mother because of how she embodied the spirit of Republican Motherhood on the cusp of the American Revolution.

³⁹ Fryer, "The Mind of Eliza Pinckney: An Eighteenth-Century Woman's Construction of Herself," 216.

⁴⁰ Schulz, *South Carolina Women: Their Lives and Times*, 79.