Source: WHITNEY PLANTATION

https://www.whitneyplantation.org/history/slavery-in-louisiana/

Indigo

During the Spanish period (1763-1803), Louisiana’s plantation owners grew wealthy from the production of indigo. Indigo is a brilliant blue dye produced from a plant of the same name. This dye was important in the textile trade before the invention of synthetic dyes. It was also a trade-good used in the purchase of West African captives in the Atlantic slave trade.

Enslaved women worked in the indigo fields growing and maintaining the crop. Enslaved men typically worked to produce the dye from the plants. In order to create the dye, enslaved workers had to ferment and oxidize the indigo plants in a complicated multi-step process. To begin, enslaved workers harvested the plants and packed the leaves into a large vat called a steeper, or *trempoire.* Once inside the steeper, enslaved workers covered the plants with water. After soaking for several hours, the leaves would begin to ferment. This process could take up to a day and a half, and it was famously foul-smelling. Enslaved workers had to time this process carefully, because over-fermenting the leaves would ruin the product. Once fermented, the leaves dyed the water a deep blue. Enslaved workers siphoned this liquid into a second vat called a beater, or *batterie.*In the batterie, workers stirred the liquid continuously for several hours to stimulate oxidation.

Finally, enslaved workers transferred the fermented, oxidized liquid into the lowest vat, called the *reposoir.*Here, they introduced lime to hasten the process of sedimentation. In this stage, the indigo separated from the water and settled at the bottom of the tank. Once it was fully separated, enslaved workers drained the water, leaving the indigo dye behind in the tank. Enslaved workers dried this sediment and cut it into cubes or rolled it into balls to sell at market.

The indigo industry in Louisiana remained successful until the end of the eighteenth century, when it was destroyed by plant diseases and competition in the market. After enslaved workers on Etienne DeBore’s plantation successfully granulated a crop of sugar in 1795, sugar replaced indigo as the dominant crop grown by enslaved people in Louisiana. Sugar production skyrocketed after the Louisiana Purchase (1803) and a large influx of enslaved people to the territory, including thousands brought from Saint Domingue (Haiti).

