

ABSTRACT  
LEGEND AND FACT IN THE LIFE OF THERESIA CABARRUS

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The purpose of this paper is to examine some of the highlights in the life of Theresia Cabarrus with a view to disentangling the legends from the facts.

Theresia left her father's castle near Madrid in 1785 to go to Paris to further her education and to acquire the social graces of the French aristocracy. At the age of fifteen, she wed Jean Jacques Devin, Marquis de Fontenay. Their home became famous for parties and salons where she met and listened with enthusiasm to Condorcet, Mirabeau, Barnave, Sieyes, Lafayette and others discuss the burning issues of the revolution.

After the execution of Louis XVI, de Fontenay, fearing for his life, persuaded Theresia to leave Paris for Bordeaux where they lived under the protection of her uncle, Dominique Cabarrus, a wealthy merchant. Fontenay left France for America, but Theresia, now divorced from him, was imprisoned as an aristocrat during the Terror.

She chanced to be seen in prison by the commissioner Jean-Lambert Tallien who had been sent from Paris to suppress anti-republican elements in Bordeaux. Tallien, a fervent admirer, immediately freed Theresia from prison. As his mistress she exercised a moderating influence on him and saved many people from the guillotine, while Tallien became wealthy from the gifts of those threatened.

Spies of the Committee of Public Safety reported to Robespierre what was going on, and Tallien was recalled to Paris, soon followed by Theresia who was arrested on orders of Robespierre and placed in Petite Force prison.

On 7 Thermidor the *ci-devant* Marquise is alleged to have sent Tallien a small dagger with a plea to save her. On 9 Thermidor, Tallien, brandishing a dagger, mounted the rostrum of the Convention and demanded the arrest of Robespierre. On 10 Thermidor, Robespierre was sent to the guillotine, and on 12 Thermidor Tallien freed Theresia from prison amidst joyous celebrations of the Parisians. Tallien and Theresia were the hero and heroine of the overthrow of Robespierre and were soon married. She was called *Notre Dame de Thermidor*.

The repressive era of the Terror had dammed up the impulse of the French for pleasure, and Theresia quickly became the Goddess of Love and Beauty, leading the new society of the Directory in pursuit of pleasure. She initiated the transparent Greek-style dresses, knee-length tunics and, on occasion, danced with Josephine de Beauharnais and Mme. Recamier as the Three Graces,

the three dressed only in light scarves.

She befriended the temporarily unemployed General Bonaparte but rejected his offer of marriage. Tallien is said to have recommended Bonaparte to Barras to defend the government of the Directory, but in that regime Tallien did not have an important place. Theresia, wishing to stay at the top of the social whirl, moved in with Barras and, it was said, became in effect the queen of France. When Bonaparte toppled the Directory, Theresia was not allowed at his court because of her notorious immorality. It was more likely because she had become the mistress of Gabriel-Julien Ouvrard, a banker whom Bonaparte despised. The emperor and his family were not exactly models of rectitude.

In July of 1805 Theresia married the Prince de Chimay and, after several years of maintaining a glittering salon in Paris, moved to the Chateau de Chimay in Belgium. She died in 1835.