

Malmaison

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Josephine Bonaparte (1763-1814)

1763 – Born Marie-Josèphe-Rose de
Tascher de la Pagerie in Trois-Ilets near Fort Royal, Martinique.

She is the eldest daughter of Joseph-Gaspard
de Tascher de La Pagerie (1735-1791) seigneur de La Pagerie, and Rose Claire
des Vergers de Sannois (1736-1807) from a family of
wealthy Martinique plantation owners.

Rose, as she will be called in her youth, grows up on her father's sugar cane plantation
which employs 100 slaves. She will later pretend to have been born in 1768. She
receives a mediocre education in the hands of the Ladies of Providence at
Fort-Royal.

1777 – François de
Beauharnais (1714-1800) who lives in France with Désirée, the sister
of Rose's father, Joseph-Gaspard, proposes a marriage between his youngest son,
the viscount Alexandre de
Beauharnais and Rose's younger sister Catherine-Désirée. Before this marriage proposal reaches Martinique,
Catherine dies of
tuberculosis. The young Alexandre accepts instead the hand of the older sister,
Rose.

1779 – The 16-year old Rose leaves Martinique for France. She arrives in Noisy-le-Grand outside Paris where
she will marry Alexandre de Beauharnais on 13
December. Alexandre turns out to be an impulsive, spendthrift and unfaithful
braggart who soon dilapidates his considerable fortune originating in his Santo

Domingo plantations. He blames his wife for her poor education, timidity and for spoiling the marriage and later of also being unfaithful.

1781 – Birth of Rose's son Eugène-Rose ((1781-1824).

1783 – Birth of Rose's daughter Hortense Eugénie Cécile (1783-1837).

1785 – Official separation of the couple. Like many spurned wives of the period Rose finds refuge with her children in a convent, the fashionable abbey of Penthemont where young women from good Parisian families were educated. In their company Josephine is at last happy, loses her timidity and perfects her manners, acquiring the seductive charm for which she will later be famous. The expense of living in Paris with a dwindling income from her inconstant estranged husband will lead Rose to move to Fontainebleau where she will live with her father in law François de Beauharnais and her aunt Desirée. In Fontainebleau she will acquire a number of “admirers” among the noblemen attached to the court that sojourns in the royal château: the count de Crenay, the duke de Lorge and the chevalier de Coigny.

1788 – Under increasing financial difficulties Rose decides to go back to her family in Martinique. She sails with Hortense leaving Eugène in France with his father.

1789 – Outbreak of the French Revolution. The social and political climate in Martinique deteriorates and slaves rise against their masters.

1790 – A terrified Rose boards ship without clothes or luggage to return to France. In the meanwhile her husband has become one of the most influential figures in the new political situation, being elected president of the Constituent Assembly.

1791 – After the dissolution of the assembly Alexandre is named commander of the French army on the Rhine.

1793 – The loss of Mayence is blamed on Alexandre's lackadaisical command. He leaves the army.

1794 – Alexandre is arrested in the increasingly paranoid and radical climate of the Terror and is imprisoned in the Carmes convent in Paris. Rose herself is arrested in April ending up in the same prison as her husband. Alexandre is guillotined a little after the fall of Robespierre on 23 July 1794. Rose is released on 6 August thanks to the intervention of one of her influential society friends, Theresa Cabarrus mistress of the powerful deputy and politician Jean-Lambert Tallien.

1795 – Rose who is quite penniless survives thanks to her charm and becomes a fixture of post-Terror Paris society. She rents a little hôtel on rue Chantierine (current rue de Victoire) on the right Bank. She becomes briefly the mistress of the new ruler of France, the head of the Directoire, Paul Barras. Barras decides to end the affair by marrying Josephine to a brilliant young officer from Corsica, Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821).

1796 – The 33-year old Rose, who has little choice, marries without much enthusiasm the 27-year old general on 8 March in a civil ceremony. Bonaparte is in love, fiercely jealous and possessive. He calls his wife Josephine after her second name, Joséphe, so as not to have to pronounce the name she has shared with her other lovers. Two days after the wedding, in a pattern that will become typical of the marriage, Napoleon departs for the Italian front leaving Josephine alone in Paris. Her new position enables her to make lucrative commissions from suppliers to her husband's armies. Her relations with the large Bonaparte clan, however, remain detestable. Pauline Bonaparte, Napoleon's favorite sister calls her “la vieille” (the old woman) and his formidable mother Laetitia will later call her “la putana” (the whore). Josephine's frequent affairs, notably with the handsome captain of the hussars Hippolyte Charles, will cause storms of rage with her jealous but equally unfaithful husband.

1798 – The couple in search of a country estate visit Malmaison near Rueil, 7 miles west of Paris. Napoleon hesitates over the price asked and leaves for his Egyptian campaign without making a commitment.

1799 – Josephine buys the Malmaison estate without consulting her absent husband in April for 325 000 francs. She borrows 15 000 for the down payment and vaguely promises the rest is successive future payments. The estate comprised 19 farms on 260 hectares, woods, the 20-room château with its furniture, dependencies, an orangerie, a hothouse, a dovecot and a mill. It produced an income of 12 000 francs a year.

The plot which will bring Bonaparte to power through the coup d'état of 18 brumaire in December is hatched in Josephine's house on the rue Chantierine after Napoleon's return from Egypt in October. Bonaparte is named first Consul of the French Republic in a political triumvirate that includes Cambacères and Lebrun. Josephine will play her role of 'first lady' of France perfectly, charming officials and guests and smoothing out incidents caused by her husband's abrupt and often brutish behavior.

1800 – Napoleon's favorite architects Charles Percier (1764-1838) and Pierre-François Fontaine (1762-1853) begin renovations at Malmaison.

1801 – Josephine orders the replanting of the gardens at Malmaison. She hires an English gardener, Howatson, replaced in 1805 by Delahaye.

1802 – Josephine's daughter Hortense marries Napoleon's brother Louis Bonaparte (1778-1846).

1803-05 – Publication of the famous albums the 'Jardin de Malmaison' illustrated by Pierre Joseph Redouté (1759-1840).

1804 – Napoleon puts an end to the Republic by creating a hereditary regime approved by the French Senate on 18 May. He is now Emperor of the French and Josephine his official consort. Josephine marries Napoleon in a discreet religious ceremony at the Tuileries Palace in Paris on 30 October. The couple is crowned in a grand ceremony imitating the old royal 'sacres' in Notre Dame on 2 December in the presence of Pope Pius VII.

1805 – Josephine's son Eugène is named Viceroy of Italy and Prince of Venice by Napoleon. He marries princess Augusta Amelia of Bavaria.

1806 – Louis Bonaparte is made King of Holland by his brother the Emperor. He leaves for Amsterdam with Hortense who is now Queen.

1807 – Building of a new gallery in Malmaison to house Josephine's growing collection of paintings of old and modern masters.

1808 – Birth of Louis's and Hortense's third son, Louis-Napoléon (1808-1873), the future Napoleon III.

1809 – Napoleon decides to divorce Josephine for political and hereditary reasons. She has been unable to bear him children, and his brother Louis has refused to give up his firstborn son with Hortense, Louis-Charles, for adoption by the Imperial couple. The divorce is pronounced on 15 December. The religious marriage is annulled in 1810. The desperate Josephine is allowed to keep her title of Empress, the Elysée palace in Paris, Malmaison and the château de Navarre in Normandy near Evreux. Napoleon accords her a generous pension and also pays off her numerous debts. Josephine retires to the damp and uncomfortable château de Navarre.

1810 – Napoleon marries Marie Louise archduchess of Austria (1791-1847) on 1 April in the château of Saint-Cloud.

1811 – Birth on 20 March of Napoleon's first legitimate son and heir, Napoleon François Charles Joseph Bonaparte (1811-1832), proclaimed King of Rome.

1812 – Josephine returns to Malmaison and redecorates her bedroom in an ostentatiously Imperial style.

The invasion of Russia by the French ends disastrously with the loss through battle and cold of Napoleon's great army.

1813 – Napoleon is defeated at Leipzig in October by the allied armies of Russia, Austria and Prussia.

1814 – On 29 March the first Russian troops enter Paris. Napoleon abdicates in Fontainebleau on 6 April and is exiled to the island of Elba in Italy. Tsar Alexander I visits Josephine in Malmaison in May. She catches a cold while showing the Tsar her famous gardens and dies of pneumonia on 29 May. She is buried in the local church of Sts Pierre et Paul in Rueil.