

Spring 2003

# Review of A Lady of the High Hills: Nathalie Delage Sumter

Daniel P. Kilbride

*John Carroll University*, [dkilbride@jcu.edu](mailto:dkilbride@jcu.edu)

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## Recommended Citation

Kilbride, Daniel P., "Review of A Lady of the High Hills: Nathalie Delage Sumter" (2003). *History*. 9.  
<http://collected.jcu.edu/hist-facpub/9>

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*A Lady of the High Hills: Natalie Delage Sumter.* By Thomas Tisdale. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001. Pp. xvii, 188. Illustrations. Cloth, \$29.95.)

In no way can Natalie Delage Sumter's life be called representative by the standards of early nineteenth-century America. It certainly was interesting, however. The goddaughter of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, Marie Louise Stephanie Beatrix Nathalie de Lage de Volude was born at Versailles in 1782. As high-ranking members of the French nobility and staunch reactionaries, her parents were early targets of the revolutionary movement. In 1793 they sent eleven-year-old Natalie with her governess to New York for her protection. The rest of her family scattered across Europe, awaiting the defeat of Revolutionary forces so that they might return to France and reoccupy the privileged positions to which they believed they were entitled. They situated themselves within the city's burgeoning French emigré community. When Aaron Burr hired Natalie's governess to run his household and raise his daughter, Theodosia, according to the French manner, Natalie became a member of his household. Burr raised Natalie as his daughter until 1801, when, at the age of nineteen, she sailed back to France, encouraged by Napoleon's policy of reconciliation with the old aristocracy.

On the crossing Natalie met and fell in love with Thomas Sumter Jr., a planter's son from South Carolina. Sumter was to serve as secretary to the American legation in Paris under Robert R. Livingston, a reward for his father's staunch Jeffersonianism. Chancellor Livingston proved instrumental in convincing Natalie's skeptical mother to accept the match. Readers will be left wondering why Livingston took such pains to aid Sumter, since Tisdale makes it clear that the two shared a mutual enmity. Nevertheless, Sumter overcame the marquise's objections, and he and Natalie married in March 1802. Sumter left the Paris embassy to serve in London, and after seven months there, during which Natalie gave birth to a daughter, they returned to his father's plantation in the "High Hills" of South Carolina in what is now Sumter County, between the lowcountry and the fall line. Though Tisdale suggests that Natalie adjusted to what he characterizes dubiously as a "wonderfully cosmopolitan rural community" (65) rather easily, the evidence suggests otherwise. Her husband's financial affairs were in disarray, she pined for France, and Natalie gave birth to two more girls in 1805 and 1806. Little wonder, then, that she welcomed Thomas's appointment as minister plenipotentiary to Portugal—whose court sat at Rio de Janeiro—in 1809. Recalled in 1817, the Sumters did not leave for the United States until 1821, by which time Natalie had given birth to four more children. Natalie only spent a few months in South

Carolina before she returned to France with Nat, her eldest daughter, and her two youngest children. It seems that she was motivated primarily by a desire to arrange for Nat's marriage to a French nobleman, a goal she attained in 1824. She married off Fanie, her next eldest daughter, to Joseph Binda, an Italian count of questionable lineage, in 1825. After a long visit to Madeira, the Sumters finally returned to the United States in 1827. Until her death in 1841, Natalie devoted herself to her sons' educations at a Catholic academy in Maryland, organizing the affairs of her husband's plantation, and promoting Roman Catholicism in the High Hills neighborhood.

Natalie Delage Sumter's story is interesting, and Thomas Tisdale tells it with workmanlike efficiency. Historians of the early national period will find this book to be of limited interest, however. It is not written for a scholarly audience, but for a popular readership interested in South Carolina. Hence it would probably not be fair to suggest that Tisdale fails to address issues such as refinement, nationalism, master-slave relations, planter-class identity, southern Catholicism, and the lives of upper-class white women, since *A Lady of the High Hills* does not seek to illuminate issues of interest to academic historians. The book's utter disregard for the Sumter family slaves—save for passages praising Natalie for her devotion to their medical care—is more disturbing, as is the romanticized or even reactionary portrait it renders of royalty, nobility, and the Old South. This account of Sumter's life can point historians toward material with which they might address questions regarding the early national South, American-European cultural relations, and other matters, but Tisdale's analysis will not contribute much to how they fashion their answers.

Daniel Kilbride, professor of history at John Carroll University, is writing a book on American leisure travelers in Europe, 1700-1865. His article on planters on the grand tour in the antebellum period will appear in the *Journal of Southern History* in Fall 2003.

***Neither Lady Nor Slave: Working Women of the Old South.*** Edited by Susanna Delfino and Michele Gillespie. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. Pp. i, 324. Tables. Cloth \$55.00; paper, \$19.95.)

This collection of thirteen essays proves that thousands of southern women who were neither lady nor slave worked in sophisticated ways to promote the well-being of their families and communities. *Neither Lady nor Slave* promises to direct "Southern women's history in significant new directions by exploring ordinary women's working lives" (1). This book fulfills its