Charlotte was born July 27, 1768 in Les Champeaux near Vitmoutiers, in the province of Normandie in France. A portrait (below) of her two days before she was guillotined shows us a strong Norman face, with a set jaw, sense of purpose and a visage of that pride of race known to all the French but especially so prevalent in Normans. She was through her mothers line a descendant of the great French Dramatists, the "Father of French Tragedy" Pierre Corneille, this being perhaps a self fulfilling prophecy. She was born into an aristocratic albeit poor family. Charlotte was educated in a convent in Caen, a usual way to obtain an education in those days and when money was scarce. She was a Royalist but possibly due in part to her state she sympathised with the ideals of the enlightenment. These sympathies found her with the moderate faction the Girondists, who though not royalists were in fact much more moderate than the Jacobins.

In September 1792 savage "September Massacres" occured in which prisoners believed to be counter revolutionary were murdered. Three Bishops and any non-juring Priests found were horribly killed and mutilated. The Princesse Laballe, friend and confidant of Marie-Antoinette was beheaded, her lifeless body was sexually abused and her head was placed upon a pike and brought to the window of the temple to "show the Queen". The massacre was the work of the san-cullotes, the trouserless ones, who felt that Paris and the de-facto government would be in danger should they leave to fight the Duke of Bruswicks forces assembled for an attack to restore the throne. More unspeakable atrocities took place, but it seems today unbelievable that it could have happened. The "September Massacres angered Charlotte Corday. She blamed the Jacobins and especially Jean Paul Marat for the atrocities.

Just as her 25th birthday in July 1793 approached, Charlotte left Caen and mounting a coach left for Paris. In her possession was a copy of Plutarch's Parallel Lives, a book of biographies of Greek and Roman leaders arranged in pairs illustrating the failings and successes of each.

Charlottes plan and motives for the killing of Marat were based probably in part on the Catholic teaching of
tyrannicide. Though Catholic doctrine condemns tyrannicide as opposed to the natural law, formerly great theologians of the Church like St. Thomas, Suarez, and Bañez, O.P. permitted rebellion against oppressive rulers when the tyranny had become extreme and when no other means of safety were available. In other words Charlotte believed that she would be stopping the murder of thousands by executing Marat, (just as Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg believed the death of Hitler would prevent more destruction in Germany). I believe tyrannicide was at least in her mind, because at her trial, Corday testified that she had carried out the assassination alone, saying "I killed one man to save 100,000." While many believe this to be in reference to Robespierre's statement at the death of Louis XVI, it shows that the teaching was at least in her mind when it is coupled with her possession of Plutarch.

Arriving in Paris she took a room at the Hôtel de Providence. Some time later she purchased a large kitchen knife at the Palais Royale. She sat down and wrote her "Adresse aux Français amis des lois et de la paix" ("Speech to the French who are Friends of Law and Peace") a manifesto about her purpose in committing an act of assassination of Marat.

Some time before noon on the 13th of July, she went to the residence of Marat, and attempted to see him. At first she was denied admittance either by a housekeeper or Mme Marat. Later that day she slipped in as a delegation was entering the residence. She found Marat, who suffered from a skin disorder, probably as a result of celiac disease writing in his bath. On the wall Marat had written La Mort! (Death). Charlotte approached him and told him she had news from Normandy of the factionary Girondins who had escaped to Caen. He asked the for the names of the deputies and when he was told he said "Good, they shall be guillotined." At these words she plunged her knife deep into Marat's chest. His last words were "À moi, ma chère amie!" To me (help) my dear friend.

Charlotte was captured by the friends of Marat before she could escape. She was tried by the tribunal, who attempted a cover up prior to the trial. Although her attorney skillfully defended her she was condemned. Corday testified that she had carried out the assassination by herself, saying "I killed one man to save 100,000."

The outcome of the trial was never really in question, and she was condemned to the guillotine. Charlotte was executed on 17 July 1793. Legend has it that after she was guillotined the executioner took her by the hair and slapped her across the face. Her face scowled at the executioner in "unequivocal indignation"! The slap was considered an unacceptable breach of etiquette and the executioner was locked away for 3 months.

The immediate result of the assassination was a new wave of terror. Marat became a martyr, and busts of Marat replaced crucifixes and religious statues that were no longer welcome under the new regime. The anti-female stance of many revolutionary leaders was increased by Corday's actions. This in turn probably led to revenge, focused on the person of Marie-Antoinette.

Marat was treated like the martyred hero, and saviour. A great ceremony took place led by Jaques Louis
David, the painter whose "Death of Marat" is shown above. The entire National Convention attended Marat's funeral and he was buried in the Couvent des Cordeliers. His remains were transferred to the Panthéon on November 25, 1793. A quasi-saint to the revolution, busts of him were placed in de-Christianized churches in the place of crucifixes. By early 1795, however, Marat's memory had become tarnished. In February, his coffin was removed from the Panthéon and the various busts and sculptures were destroyed. His final resting place is the cemetery of the Church Saint-Étienne-du-Mont.