



*1960 restoration and installation at Rosedown.*

# The History of the Rosedown Bed, a Gothic Tale

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The dramatic story of the Rosedown Bed began with the presidential election of 1844. Henry Clay was a presidential candidate for the second time, and it seemed that he could not lose. His party, the Whigs, contracted Crawford Riddle 'N' Journeymen of Philadelphia to build a grand suite of bedroom furnishings, suitable for the White House. The suite, with the bed as the dominant feature, would be built in the new Gothic Revival style. The President's bedroom, later known as the Lincoln Bedroom, was measured. The ceiling height was 14'. The bed would be constructed to measure at 13' 6" in height. It would be built of Brazilian rosewood and be fit for a king, or at least for a great orator like Henry Clay.

But Clay's presidency was not to be, and the rub was Texas. Texas had won independence from Mexico and filed for statehood. As a state, Texas threatened the balance of slave states in favor of the South, and assured a war with Mexico. Clay, the Great Compromiser, argued against Texas's admission into the Union. Clay lost the election, and lost the bed. Their candidate defeated, the Whigs put the bed up for auction. It would not be the last time Texas would play a part of the history of the bed.

A wealthy Southern planter named Daniel Turnbull, a friend and supporter of Clay's, purchased the bed for the extravagant price of \$1,300. Dismantled, the bed took a long journey by ship and wagon to St. Francisville, Louisiana. The name of the Turnbull plantation was Rosedown, 3,000 plus acres of prime delta bottom land. Turnbull's wife, Martha, installed at Rosedown one of the finest gardens in 19th century America. Grand as the house was, the ceilings could not accommodate the bed, and Turnbull built a new wing on the house just for the bed. This required adding another wing on the other side of the house to balance the design. The bed was becoming expensive, but it was the highlight of their collection.

The bed remained at Rosedown with the Turnbull family for over a hundred years, surviving the Civil War, two World Wars, depressions and hurricanes. By 1955 the last heirs had passed away and the grand old place went on the market. Catherine Fondren Underwood was the president of the River Oaks Garden Club of Houston, Texas, when she toured Rosedown and learned the estate was for sale. The remnants of the magnificent gardens attracted her and her husband, Milton Underwood, to Rosedown. They purchased Rosedown and began the restoration of the gardens and the house. The estate was lovingly brought back to life and the bed was eventually restored around 1960.

After Mrs. Underwood's death in 1970 the house became a museum. In 2000, the owners decided to sell the contents of the house. The bed was offered to the Dallas Museum of Art for \$450,000 and they accepted. The remainder of the contents of the estate were dispersed at auction. The two chairs of the bedroom suite went to the Bayou Bend Collection in Houston. The bed was on its way to Dallas.

*Bowman: The Rosedown Bed*

## *The Rosedown Bed, Conservation History*

During the 1960 restoration the bed was aggressively stripped and sanded, virtually eradicating the entire original finish history of the bed. The finish film analysis revealed fragments of original resin and wood particles floating in the lacquer film that was used as replacement finish. This 40 year old film also exhibited decline from water damage and UV exposure. Structurally, the bed experienced glue failure. This resulted in large elements becoming detached from the posts, many loose veneers and some veneer losses. The interior of the canopy, decorated with wall paper, was loose and water stained. At the top of the interior of the canopy was a tassel hanging from a carved and gilded rondel that was suffering gesso failure. Charles Venable and Steven Harrison, the Decorative Arts Curators at the Dallas Museum of Art, considered this situation of total original finish loss a perfect opportunity for a presentation of original intent. The directive was for complete restoration of damage and finish replacement with a period finish as close to the original presentation as possible. The finish would not be patinated to simulate age but rather, polished bright as new as it might have looked for delivery to the White House.



*Condition of the bed prior to 1960 restoration.*



*Detail of rail showing UV damage to lacquer.*





*Detail of canopy showing degraded lacquer.*



*Replacing missing veneers with Brazilian rosewood.*

After taking samples, the finish was removed chemically. Fortunately all of the UV damage was confined to the finish. Almost all of the the original pieces of the bed were present, if separated. The separated parts were replaced with hide glue and all veneers were stabilized. In keeping with the concept of original presentation, age cracks were filled. A filler was used to mitigate the very large pores of the rosewood. Hand brushed, de-waxed, ultra-light shellac was chosen as a replacement finish. Twelve coats of shellac were required to sufficiently fill the pores for the look requested. The shellac was smoothed with 220 grit white paper at coats six and nine. A final sanding with 1,000 grit wet paper gave the very smooth finish. The polishing phase consisted of rotten stone and oil, followed by a jewelers rouge formula. Finally the oil was removed with Novus #2. The finish was then waxed with Tre-Wax, a high carnauba paste wax. The entire project occupied four men for four months, consuming 1,600 man hours.



*Handbrushing twelve coats ultralight dewaxed shellac.*



*Custom cradles attached to lifts hold canopy in position while bed is assembled underneath.*



*Above: Detail of finished canopy and spire.*

*Above Left: Finished installation at Dallas Museum of Art.*

*Left: D.M.A installation.*