

## **To the New Owner of this Roll Top Secretary Desk**

Refurbished by David A Ramsey in March of 2019.

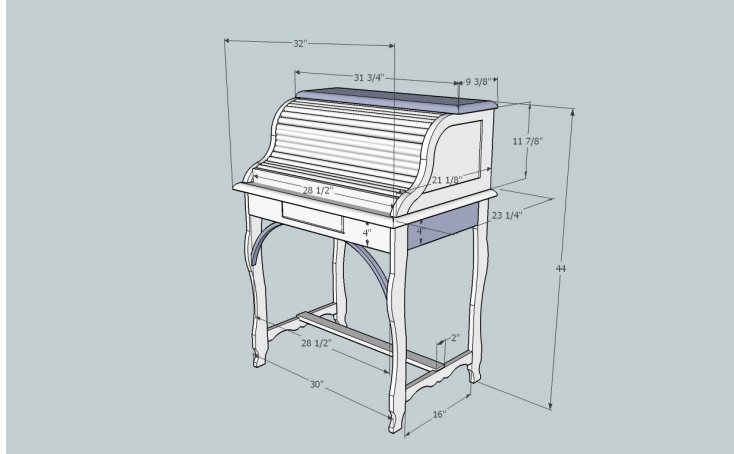
The desk was acquired in the early 80's from rental property where it was left by a former occupant. It has been setting in my work shop for the past 30 odd years waiting for someone to give it attention.



**Desk renovation completed**



**Desk with tambour door and drawers open, keys on desk**



**Drawing rendition of the desk design**



**Completed renovation with tambour door open**

### **Notable Design features**

- Main components are made from solid oak. Sides and back are raised panel design. Most contemporary desks of this type are not raised panel. Panels are solid oak not plywood.
- Drawer sides and bottom appear to be made of solid Poplar.
- Small drawer on desk top has one side of poplar and one side solid oak.
- Drawer fronts are oak.
- Drawer pulls are molded brass on large drawer and wood on small drawer.
- Back raised panel assembly consists of solid oak rails and stiles, the panel is ¼ inch thick solid oak.
- Top side panel is solid oak frame with solid oak panel.
- Legs are solid oak.
- Legs are secured to desk frame with tongue of groove joinery.
- Bottom leg brace is also tongue and groove joinery.
- Main desk drawer slides on oak and poplar formed into L shape to support and guide the drawer.
- Desk top is ¾ inch solid oak with edges rounded.
- Desk top was secured to frame with 4 wood screws, two in front and two in back.
- Side panels were secured to back panel with tongue and groove joinery.
- Side panel and back panel assembly was secured to desk top with three wood screws one on each side and one in the back.
- Side panels were positioned with 4 – 7/16 inch dowels secured into desk top.
- Side panel and back panel assembly top original joinery was not obvious though it appears it may have been secured with 2 dowels.
- Tambour door was made of grooved slats and they were held together with two brass strips secured with tacks in the slats and on the back of the large slat that holds the lock.
- There was a lock that was marked with the name “Eagle Lock Co.” There were no keys with the desk.
- All glue joints were secured with Hide glue.
- Original finish appears to have been a honey colored stain and varnish or just a honey colored varnish.

### **Condition when acquired**

- One corner brace in the front was missing.



**Corner brace that was remade**

- Legs were very wobbly. I later determined that the side of the groove at the top of two of the legs was broken.
- Three decorative trim pieces at top of the legs were missing. The one still attached was damaged.



**Trim piece with damage**

- Most of the glue joints were loose. They were easy to disassemble because the glue had become brittle. I believe the glue was Hide glue, which apparently will become brittle and lose its holding power after many years. Hide glue was commonly used in furniture making before the advent of modern wood glues.
- There seems to have been an attempt to repair the desk one time by driving nails in loose joints. The joints with nails include leg bottom brace, the top that covers the tambour door, a corner brace, decorative trim, and the front brace that was still with the desk.



**Corner brace with nail protruding**

- There was a nail driven through the back frame member into the drawer slides which was probably not the way it was originally secured.
- The tambour door brass strips were broken near the large lock slat.



**Slats with brass strip**

- A new finish had been added to the original finish. It was black finish that appears to have been paint or a black stain. The finish was in very poor condition.



**Tambour door assembly shown from back**



**Tambour door slats, middle piece with handles is lock slat, on right are 1 inch wide slats shown from back side**

- The center console included a drawer in the middle, 12 cubby hole storage slots, two letter sized shelves and upright opening on each side. There was one drawer in the middle with oak front, one side was poplar and one side is solid oak. The bottom appears to be poplar. There is no indication that the other cubby slots had drawers.



**Center console after removal from desk top**

- Desk top glue joint was separated.



**Desk top showing separated joint**

- The desk lock was not working and could not be freed with penetrating oil or by trying to pick the lock. As mentioned above there were no keys with the lock. Note the latch plate is stamped with “Eagle Lock Co”





Original lock, face plate, strike plate

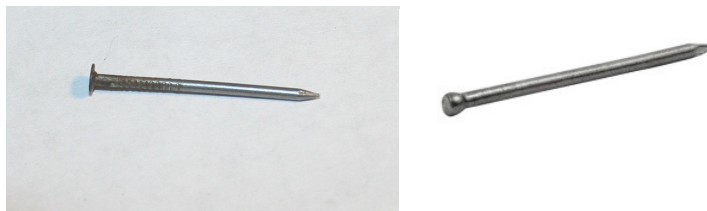
### How old is the desk?

- I don't have much to go on to establish the age of the desk.
- The marking on the lock was "EAGLE LOCK Co" That company was located in Terryville, Connecticut. That name was first used in 1854 after some companies merged to form a new company. The company was in business until 1975 when they ceased operation.
- The screws that were used in the assembly appear to be machine manufactured.
- My research tells me the first machine made screws were manufactured around 1848. The screws are slotted and are typical of older wood screws. They had some rust so the material is likely some grade of steel. The first Phillips head screws were used in the 1930's. So that would indicate the desk likely predates the invention of the Phillips screw.



Original wood screws

- The nails used to secure the back and top of cubby hole assembly were not like current finish nails, but I have not been able to find any information to definitively date them.



Note the thin head instead of widened head of current finish nails showed at right

- All the panels on the back, sides and drawer side and bottoms are made from solid wood either what appears to be poplar and solid oak. This is bottom and back of large drawer, both damaged



**Bottom and back of drawer both damaged**



**This is back panel 1/4 inch thick solid oak**



**Back panel showing vertical saw marks**

- Research shows that plywood was first introduced to furniture manufacturing in 1910. So the desk likely predates the introductions of plywood in furniture. By 1920 most thin panels in furniture were made of plywood.
- There was some 7/16 inch what appears to be smooth maple dowels in the desk top.



**These 7/16 inch dowels were used to locate the tambour door assembly**

- They may have been glued but came apart very easily. If they were glued they were not the only method of securing the tambour door assembly to the top. The tambour door assembly was also secured by three screws. Use of this size and type of dowel was commonly used in furniture until about 1900. So perhaps the desk predates that date.

- I did note the bottom braces between the legs had heavy saw marks on the bottom where to decorative curves were cut. Also the decorative piece between the legs and the side panels had similar saw marks. I don't think this fact says anything about the date of manufacture but it could mean that the desk was hand made. Not made in a factory.



**Showing saw marks on the curved surfaces**

- The mixture of woods such as in the small drawer sides of Poplar and oak might mean the desk was made in a cabinet or furniture shop rather than a factory.



**Drawer front and right side are oak, the left side, back and bottom are what appears to be poplar**

- The cubby hole assembly also has mixed wood.



**All panels are made of 1/4 solid poplar except two panels at bottom left are solid oak**

- I looked on every piece closely for any identification marks or manufacturing labels to no avail. The lack of marking of any kind further makes me think the desk was custom made in a small furniture shop.



- I have not been able to find a desk on the internet quite like this one, so perhaps it is one of a kind.
- My guess is the desk was made in early 1900 hundreds or late 1800 hundreds.

### **Refurbishing process**

- Obviously the condition of the piece structurally and the poorly applied black finish required the desk be completely disassembled and the finish stripped for reassembly and refinishing. Disassembly was easy since all the glue joints were loose and easily pulled apart by hand or with a few soft whacks with a hammer.



**Desk top assembly showing legs coming apart**

- The finish was difficult to remove, requiring multiple applications of paint stripper and scraping between applications. The most difficult part was removing the finish from the cubby hole assembly. It required many applications of paint remover and finish remover. I removed the back and the top panels to get access to the inside surfaces. The top and back panels were damaged and cracked so I replaced them with plywood. I also had to replace the side bottom panels that are shown in picture damaged



**Damage to side bottom of cubby hole assembly shown from bottom**



**Cubby hole assembly shown from bottom. Note black stain**

- All surfaces were sanded and refinished with at least three coats of Polyurethane.

- The desk top had to be edge glued where the original glue joint had separated. I reinforced the joint with biscuit joinery.



**Desk top with glue joint separated**

- I made one new leg brace and four decorative side pieces. One brace was missing and three decorative pieces were missing and the other was damaged. The damaged one is shown above.



**New part shown at left, new decorative piece on right**

- The large middle drawer was coming apart and bottom and back were damaged. I replaced the damaged bottom oak faced plywood and the back with solid poplar.



**Damaged drawer bottom and back, drawer with new parts added**

- I reassembled the tambour door and installed a new lock.



**New lock installed on Tambour lock slat, and strike plate on desk top**

- All parts were glued or screwed together.
- The tambour door assembly (sides, paneled back and the door) is screwed to the desk top. If necessary it could be removed if repair of tambour door became necessary. Original 7/16 inch dowels were used to position the tambour door assembly.

- There are some nail holes that I left as part of the history of the desk. Nails were added to some joints in what appears to have been an attempt to repair the loose joints. My intent was to keep the desk as close to its original design as possible, but it was impractical to try to leave the finish as found, which was not the original finish anyway. The desk was not viable with all original parts since many were missing or damaged and the glue joints were not secure.



**Top of Tambour Door Assembly showing nail holes and  
dowel hole in middle, dowel was missing**

- Desk was stained with dark oak stain. The finish is three coats of polyurethane.
- The refurbished desk is usable and attractive and will live for many more years to provide many years of reliable service.

I hope you enjoy your vintage Roll Top Secretary Desk.

Best Regards,  
David A Ramsey  
Woodworking hobbyist