When the 8th annual Christmas at the Lafayette Museum opens to the public today at 1122 Lafayette St., guests will be afforded the opportunity to take a trip into the City's past - and one stop that cannot be overlooked is at the portrait of Rosabella Budd Mills Miller, located in the living room.

The original rooms of the museum were constructed circa 1800 by Jean Mouton, one of the first settlers of Southwest Louisiana. His son, Alexandre, was the first Democratic governor in the state.

"Dr. William Mills bought the house in 1849 and lived there until it was sold in 1859," museum board member, Virginia Yongue, told The Advertiser.

His daughter, Rosa Bud Mills married the Rev. John A. Miller.

As the story goes, the original painting of Rosa Bud Miller, at age 25, was painted by Constance Carlin of New Orleans in 1857. The young woman was painted in a white dress; however, when she became a widow, an unknown artist painted black "widow's weeds" over her dress.

It was customary of the times to have another portrait done when a woman became a widow. If circumstances were such to deem this unaffordable, then someone would paint over the existing painting, according to artist Lorelei DeHart.

"Due to the poor quality of work evident in the over-painting, an x-ray was made of the painting and the outline of the original painting was revealed," she said. "It is a tribute to the restorer, Wayne Ditch, that this portrait was saved and restored."

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Lorelei DeHart

Ditch has a degree in fine arts from USL. He worked as an apprentice under Deltart, who has a degree in art education. She is the former owner of Heritage Gallery. Deltart has studied with Bill Hiner, former restorer and conservator of Prado Museum in Madrid, Spain.

Ditch began work on the painting of Rosa Bud in August 1990 and finished at the end of November last year.

"About 10 years ago, Dolly Gibson, the great-granddaughter of the lady in the painting, brought it to me at the Gallery and wanted it cleaned and patched," DeHart remembered. It also had a hole as large as a 50-cent piece.

"We both knew that there was obvious restoration done before. She suspected the black dress was painted on," Ditch added, mainly because the work on the face did not match that of the dress.

"One of the things for us, who are not involved with Rembrandts, is portraits of ancestors - and being in the South, we have many, many here," DeHart said.

Ditch's own art work is meticulous and detailed. The artist spent months painstakingly removing the black overlay to reveal the white dress beneath. He used literally thousands of cotton swabs and carefully calculated the results. Ditch feels very passionately about his work.

"It is very gratifying to know that an object is very old, and it will last into the future," Ditch said. "This is a part of Lafayette's history - part of our heritage. It's interesting to know that it will be around a good long time after I'm gone."