wagon ride down the unpaved streets of downtown Alexandria in 1873 brought you past storekeepers with names like Levin, Levy, Weil, and Rosenthal. Although the town of 2,000 people was only one-sixth Jewish, the commercial business of Alexandria was 75 percent Jewish owned and operated. Later came merchants named Bauer, Simon, Ginsberg, Caplan, Wellan, Kaplan, Mayer, Hirsch, Pincus, Bialy, Mykoff, Silver, and Katz. These and other Jewish merchants have been an integral part of the rich history of Alexandria's retail business community. Though constituting a small percentage of the general population, those who practice the Jewish faith in Alexandria always have been prominent on the local business scene. Descendants of a number of these early entrepreneurs remain active in the local business and professional community.

The early Jewish settlers came here because of Alexandria's attractive location and because of the countless connections of families and friends who preceded them. Alexandria's geographic location along the Red River at the center of the state made it a natural trading and transportation hub from the time of its settlement in the 18th century. Too, the area had rich farmlands, a wealth of longleaf timber and good railroads. It was a good place to be a merchant.

Though many of the Jewish immigrants who came to America had aristocratic, educated backgrounds, many of the professions were not open to them in the U.S., explained Jacque Caplan of Caplan's Men's Store. "They learned the language fast, and became merchants because they could read and write," she said.

An article published in the 1880s in the Louisiana Democrat (an Alexandria newspaper) pointed out that "for business purposes, the location of Alexandria is so central that business sense and capital combined cannot fail to succeed. A single business house (the late A. Heyman) has been known to sell a quarter of a million yearly."

Mention of the earliest Jewish merchants to settle in Rapides can be found in Rabbi Martin Hinchin's "Fourscore and Eleven — A History of the Jews of Rapides Parish 1828-1919." Rabbi Hinchin published the book in 1984 while serving as rabbi of Congregation Gemiluth Chassodim in Alexandria.

According to Rabbi Hinchin's research, census records of 1810 and 1820 do not mention the names of any Jewish people, but at least one early record shows that a man named Samuel Kohn purchased property in Rapides Parish around 1808 and sold it in 1816.
Henry Michael Hyams was an early Jewish settler who practiced law in the 1830s with the firm of Dunbar and Elgee in Alexandria. Owner of a successful plantation and other real estate, he later moved to New Orleans, served in the state Senate and became lieutenant governor under Governor Moore.

It was not until the 1840s and 1850s that there seemed to be a significant settlement of Jewish people in the Alexandria-Pineville area. The first notices of Jewish retail establishments began to appear in the Red River Republican newspaper in 1844. A Hecht & Co. was a corner store ("New Cheap Cash Store") located under the residence of the aforementioned Henry Hyams, selling general apparel for both ladies and men. Another merchant, A. Klotz, cotton buyer and coffee seller, was said to have a new store and warehouse.

The Jewish community in Alexandria began to grow steadily from the 1850s and the 1860s into the turn of the century, fueled by an influx of Jewish immigrants from France, Germany and Russia. Some of these immigrants came seeking new opportunities in America, some came to escape cruel persecution and prejudice in their native lands.

The 1850 census listed at least 24 Jewish residents in Rapides. The Jews represented about one half of one percent of the population of the parish at the time, and less than two percent of the population of Alexandria.

Perhaps not counted in this official census was an unknown number of Jewish peddlers, a transient population who plied their wares in and around the parish for many years. Some of these men eventually settled down in Alexandria to open stores.

Prominent Jewish merchants during the 1850s and 60s included Julius Levin, a native of Prussia. He came to Alexandria in 1853 and started a successful mercantile business. Levin served in the Confederate army, and then after the war developed a large and successful lumber business. One of the original stockholders of Rapides Bank, Levin was a member of the city council in 1867 and served as president of the school board.

The Rosenthal name also became well known here beginning in the mid-19th century. There were four Rosenthal brothers - Moses, Isaac, Mires and Jonas — who made their way to Rapides Parish from France, and were cotton brokers, grocers and general storekeepers.

Jonas Rosenthal first had his general merchandise store on the corner of Third and Jackson Streets. He later joined his brothers in the retail grocery business at a location at Second and DeSoto Streets. Active in community affairs, Jonas served as president of the school board, was on the city council, and was postmaster for a time.

In an Alexandria Daily Town Talk ad from 1883, Rosenthal's Grocery advertised its motto as "Quick Sales and Small Profits" at the "Sign of the
Big Ham, on Second Street, opposite the Town Hall.

The Weils, originally from Bavaria, were also among the early prominent Jewish merchants who came to Alexandria. In 1866, John Weil was offering “a large and well-selected stock of new, fashionable and seasonal goods, wares and Yankee notions” in a store located opposite the Ferry Landing on Front Street, according to Rabbi Hinchin’s book.

Simon Weil operated a store and was postmaster at Weil Post Office on Bayou Rapides, where he farmed. Eduard (Edward) Weil, served as the only Jewish mayor Alexandria ever had, from 1875-76. Later, Ben Weil Jr. helped to initiate steamboat trade between Alexandria and Shreveport in 1878.

Bertrand (“Bat”) Weil, the son of John Weil, was one of the original founders of Weil Brothers and Bauer, which at one time was the largest general store in the downtown shopping area. He and Felix Bauer opened their business as Bauer & Weil in 1887 on the corner of Second and Jackson Streets. After the store moved to DeSoto and Murray, Bauer sold his interest and left for France.

In 1895, the business was reorganized to become Weil Brothers and Bauer, reflecting ownership by Bertrand Weil, his brother Samuel, and brother-in-law George Bauer. The partners built a large, two-story brick building at DeSoto and Second Streets, and filled it with groceries, men’s and women’s clothing, fabrics, shoes, bedding and a range of other goods. The store continued in operation for many years.

Jeannece (Mrs. Abe) Caplan, whose father-in-law David Caplan founded Caplan’s Men’s Shops in 1891, remembers that Weil Brothers and Bauer “had everything, including fittings for horses.”

Jewish immigrants who came into this country typically had to have “sponsors,” U.S. citizens who would guarantee them employment and/or a place to live. That was how Caplan’s got its start, when local merchant Bernard Ginsberg brought David Caplan down from New York and put him to work as a peddler of general merchandise in the late 1880s.

Ginsberg brought other young immigrants to Alexandria, as well, recalls his daughter, Lillian Goldstein, who still lives here. “Papa used to go up to New York to buy things for the store. He saw all these boys, and brought them down here. He put packs on their backs and sent them out to sell; they even slept in his warehouse.”

She explained that these young peddlers bought their merchandise from her father, and then worked as independent contractors, walking throughout the Central Louisiana countryside to sell their wares.

Ginsberg, whose store remained open in downtown Alexandria until the early 1960s under the ownership of his daughter and her husband Irving Goldstein, founded his store B. Ginsberg’s in 1883. It was a dry goods store, first located on Front Street, then later moved to Second Street, and still later (under the Goldsteins) to Third Street.

Caplan’s got its start in 1891 as a general merchandise store on Front Street in Alexandria. (Front Street no longer exists, having been erased when the existing Red River levee was built.

A devastating Front Street fire in 1901 forced David Caplan to move his store to a new location at 1010 Second Street, where the business grew and prospered. In succeeding years, Caplan’s moved twice more, to 1124 Third Street across from the old Paramount Theatre, and in 1949 to its present location at 916 Third Street. (An interesting note: Caplan’s present downtown location encompasses space once occupied by B. Ginsberg, the founder’s original sponsor.)

Other early Jewish merchants were the Gehrs, whose family members were in the general merchandise business downtown with a wholesale and retail grocery concern, large real estate holdings, and in the early 1880s “The Palace Bar” at Second and Murray Streets.

Solomon Joseph had a meat and vegetable market before the turn of the century, the Kaplan family had the Fair Store; and Simon Brothers had a store on Second Street which sold “ladies dress goods, house furnishing goods and men’s clothing, shoes and hats.”

There was E. Schmalinski and Son,
a music business on Front Street, selling pianos, organs and other musical instruments. Front Street was also home to the Lisso-Florsheim Grocery Co., owned by Paul Lisso and Henry Florsheim.

Weiss and Goldring, long a fixture of downtown Alexandria, was established in 1899 in Many by Morris Weiss and Dave Goldring, who were brothers-in-law. The partners moved their clothing store to Alexandria in 1907, opening at Second and Murray Streets. The department store moved again in 1918 to larger quarters at Third and DeSoto Streets, and that same year, Dave Goldring sold his interest and moved to Shreveport.

Wellan’s Department Store was another retail center founded by a Jewish merchant. Louis Wellan, who had once worked for Caplan’s, first opened a store in 1916 on Second Street. He then bought the old Simon Brothers building on Third Street during the depression and moved his store there. Gus Kaplan, who now operates his own retail specialty store in Alexandria, was general manager of Wellan’s for a number of years, and was Louis Wellan’s nephew.

Jewish merchants continued to open new businesses in the downtown sector in the early decades of this century. People’s Shoe Store was originally a downtown store, started in 1928 by Isaac Mykoff. Security Sporting Goods, operated by the Katz family, began as a pawn shop and jewelry store downtown. Schwartzberg’s, a general merchandise store, was a Second Street fixture for many years. Bialy’s clothing store, still in operation on Third Street, and Koblenz’s Jewelers were other stores operated by Jewish merchants.

Memories of the World War II era are still fresh in the minds of both Jeannice Caplan and Lillian Goldstein, who recall that time as the busiest for their respective stores. “You could not see the sidewalks on Saturday night because of all the soldiers here,” said Mrs. Goldstein.

Caplan’s had so many customers during the war years, said Mrs. Caplan, that at times “we would have to lock the door after a certain number had come in, let them shop, and then unlock the door to let them out and to let more in.” Caplan’s carried only men’s clothing by that time, and stocked military goods as well. Shopkeepers had difficulty securing merchandise to sell then, particularly men’s white shirts. Stores were open until late at night to accommodate the wartime crowds.

Throughout the history of the Jewish retail community here, there generally seems to have been a spirit of congeniality and friendship between them and the larger Gentile community. The Jewish temple was for many years located across from St. Francis Xavier Cathedral, and Mrs. Caplan remembers going to Mass occasionally with her Catholic friends.

An intricate web of family ties can be found within the Jewish retail community throughout its history here, with many examples of family connections within and among stores.

Jewish merchants were prominent in civic, political and social affairs in Alexandria long before the turn of the century. Many served in leadership positions on the school board, police jury and in city government. Both Rosenthal and Nachman Elementary Schools were named for influential Jewish citizens.

“Jewish merchants were so active in community work that there was a comradeship, a brotherhood,” explained Jacque Caplan. In a town that for decades went only as far as Bolton Avenue, “there was such a need for one another in this community.”

Such interdependence in the early years helped to fuel Alexandria’s development as a retail trade center. Those first enterprising Jewish merchants were at the center of the action, building a retail community as they built new lives in the heart of Louisiana.