One of Abbeville's oldest and most interesting buildings owes its existence to the influx of some astute Jewish businessmen into the almost primitive community of the Vermilion river almost a century ago.

The building, at 118 Main St., for many years was known as the Wells Fargo Building. Today it is the charming and fantastic home of James Fontenot, Abbeville attorney, musician, and former state senator.

The old red brick structure has been completely renovated by Fontenot, who did the job without losing one iota of the building's pride, air of antiquity, and historical aura.

Perhaps we could say that the conversion work is complete, but Fontenot has many more plans for it that will keep him occupied for years.

Indirectly the building owes its existence to the hard-working, intelligent and educated Jewish men of Polish and Alsatian descent who moved to Abbeville from New Orleans during the town's early years. Among these were Ludwig Sokoloski, Solomon Wise, his son Eli, and Jonas Well and his father, Carl according to Fontenot.

Former New Orleans Residents These men were knowledgeable in commerce and business affairs and some established themselves by literally peddling pots and pans and other merchandise in primitive fashion. Fontenot said. They had been in business in New Orleans, had sources of supplies and knew how to get their goods delivered to Abbeville on paddlewheel steamboats that negotiated Vermillion Bay and steamed up the Vermillion River to Abbeville.

The Wells Fargo Building was built as a consequence of the successes of these early businessmen. They built several buildings in what was then the heart of Abbeville's business district on Quai des Francais (Frenchmen's Wharf). Later this street was named Main St. The Landry Building at the corner of Main and Pere Magdol is also one of these early structures.

The far-fung Wells Fargo organization acquired the building in 1901 and used it as a receiving depot and storage facility. Other Wells Fargo functions, such as the sale of travelers checks, were also carried out there.

Mule Was Smart During his research of the building, Fontenot learned that a so-called Wells Fargo mule that pulled a freight wagon became something of a character around town during the period from 1901 to 1911.

"It was a white mule and it didn't object, rats inhabited it. I'm sure some people thought I was goofy when I asked to buy it," Fontenot laugh.

The attorney bought the building without having seen the inside.

Walls Changed He examined the interior after the purchase, and his first chore was to remove the beaded pine walls that covered the interior of the brick walls. He found the underside of the planks more attractive than the outside and used them for non-brick interior walls.

The large cypress entrance door was moved from its center position to one side and installed in a decorated,idented entranceway of an outdoor foyers, which protects visitors as they wait to be ushered in.

The "inside" foyer sets the theme for what is to come. A non-religious stained glass window originally from a north Louisiana church more or less tells the first-time visitor to expect a mellow, antique, comfortable air to prevail inside.

Plays Presented The hallway opens into a 25 by 40-foot living area. If one should think, "Golly, this area is big enough to accommodate a theater-full of people," he would be right. It has held a theater-full on two occasions.

The Abbey Players of the Abbeville Little Theater have produced two plays in Fontenot's living room. One was "Ten Little Indians" by Agatha Christie, and the other was "Arsenic and Old Lace" by Joseph Kesselring.

The audiences numbered 150 each night.

A Franklin stove in the living room is ready, if called on, to supply heat, and a portable Murphy bed stands by to accommodate the big living room into a guest room. The Murphy bed is something else: it looks like a shelf in a cabinet designed for music history from the University of Southwestern Louisiana and he has continued his interest in music while engaged in law practice.

This interest is reflected in the grand piano in the living area, a harpsichord in his bedroom, and a pipe organ in the breakfast room.

Fontenot is restoring the pipe organ, and he has got it to a point where he can demonstrate its mellow tones.

If a physical structure such as the Wells Fargo Building can be said to be fortunate, the Fontenot home has more than its share. Its existence has been dredged from the "pits," its life undoubtedly lengthened far beyond its expectancy, and its respectability has been returned. Further, it has the loving and tasteful care of a sensitive and talented man.

WELLS FARGO BUILDING - The old building at 118 S. Main St. in Abbeville has been referred to as the Wells Fargo Building for many years. However, it has been converted to an unusual home by attorney James Fontenot. Only major changes made to the front are replacement of the entranceway from the center to one side and installation of a modern garage door.

MUSICAL ATTORNEY - Fontenot, a former state senator, is a graduate musician and former music teacher. He has retained his love for music. Here he is playing a harpsichord in his bedroom. He is currently restoring an old pipe organ in his breakfast room.

HUGE LIVING ROOM - Only a small area of the 22 by 40-foot living room is shown here as Fontenot has coffee with a visitor. The room is so large and so furnished that it easily accommodated a stage and an audience of 150 who attended two Little Theater plays produced in it.