KNOWN AS WELLS FARGO BUILDING

Old Abbeville Structure Now A Home

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One of Abbeville’s oldest and most interesting buildings owes its existence to the influx of some asute, Jewish businessmen into the almost primitive community on the Vermilion River almost a century ago.

The building, at 118 Main St., was once 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 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 Weil 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 to Abbeville on paddlewheel steamboats that negotiated Vermilion Bay and steamed up the Vermilion 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 Marquette is also in 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 pulled a freight wagon became something of a character among town during the period from 1870 to 1891. "It was a white mule and it didn’t need a driver," he related. "He came from the railroad by himself (to the Wells Fargo Building) and backed up to the door. Right up to the curb—it was all mud—and would just deliver it without a driver."

Charles Steen established a machine shop in the building and after he abandoned it in 1962 it became a warehouse again. When Fontenot acquired it from the Steen family, it was in its worst condition ever—vines grew inside the walls, raccoons made their home in it, and when the raccoons didn’t object, rats inhabited it.

I’m sure some people thought I was goofy when I asked to buy it," Fontenot laughed.

The attorney bought the building without having seen inside.

Walls Changed

He examined the interior after the purchase, and his first chore was to remove the beaded pine walls 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 entry door was moved from its center position to one side and installed in a decorated, indentented entranceway—somewhat of an "outdoor" foyer, which protects visitors as they wait to be ushered in.

The "inside" foyer sets the theme for what is to come. A non-reducing 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 hallways 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 has 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 convert the big living room into a guest room. The Murphy bed is something else: it looks like a fat closed roll type desk—until it’s opened and unfolded. Fontenot has a degree in 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 receptibility has been returned. Further, it has the loving and tasteful care of a sensitive and talented man.