

*With*  
EDWARDS  
*in the*  
GOVERNOR'S  
MANSION



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MANSION  
FROM ANGOLA TO FREE MAN

By Forest C. Hammond-Martin, Sr. • Edited by Tom Aswell



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All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts,  
His acts being seven ages.

—Shakespeare



# Contents

Acknowledgments	9
Prologue	11
<b>PART I</b>	
1 Krewe of da Mansion	17
2 Run, Forest, Run!	27
3 The Middleton Drug Store Shootout	59
4 The Baton Rouge Criminal Justice System	83
5 The Plea	121
6 Louisiana State Peniversity at Angola	135
7 The Fighting Inmate Lawyer	153
8 Round One: Saint vs. the Criminal Justice System	181
9 Round Two: Short and Sweet	191
<b>PART II</b>	
10 Leaving That Place, Angola	197
11 Voices and Echoes at the Mansion	203
12 Louisiana's Slavery Not Abolished—Just Hidden	219
13 Convict Chefs and Butlers—Louisiana's Best	225
14 The Setup	239
15 The Amazing Ball Runner	253
16 Boxing, Tea Parties, Chess, and Football	259
17 Serious Underlying Ramifications	271
18 The First Couple on Trial	279
19 Fifteen Months of Building Pressure	285
20 Listening to a Still Small Voice	295
Epilogue	337





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## Prologue

This is the story of a young man who made a mistake—a grave error in judgment. He was black, he lived in Louisiana, he was a star athlete, and he was a first offender, but he was involved in a crime in which a well-known white businessman was killed.

This is a true story where you will see state and federal criminal justice systems still immersed in the politics of the Civil War, still swimming in the corruption of the Carpetbaggers, and still so divided by bigotry that Lady Justice's blindfold is permanently askew so she might peek at the color of a man's skin before dispensing justice—a justice handed down with the mentality of a plantation overseer.

Corruption in Louisiana isn't news; it's business as usual. It was the early 1970s, and times were tumultuous. Most historians mark this era, which started a decade earlier with the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Bobby Kennedy, and Medgar Evers and ended with Vietnam and Watergate, as the end of America's innocence. The ground was shifting like quicksand under our feet as we found we could no longer trust the government, that we were unbeatable in war, and that we were always right.

Television brought the Vietnam War into our living rooms and then returned us to the fantasy worlds of *Adam-12* and *The Brady Bunch*. Television and movies were only beginning to reflect society with *The Godfather* and *All in the Family*. *The Deer Hunter*, *Platoon*, and *Apocalypse Now* were still years away from showing us the darker side of the Vietnam War.

In June 1972, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled Louisiana's death penalty unconstitutional, although it would be reinstated four years later. In July 1972, Gov. Edwin W. Edwards signed a bill to strike down the infamous Jim Crow laws that had succeeded for generations in keeping blacks in their place, with separate schools, toilets, drinking fountains, and seats in the back of the bus.

The *Baton Rouge Advocate* newspaper devoted a headline and a

mere five paragraphs to the governor's historic action. It quoted one black legislator. The white legislators were silent, because in reality, only outward appearances had changed.

To many Southern whites, a nigger was still a nigger. The color of his skin meant that he was somehow genetically beneath whites as well as inherently evil. Louisiana jails and prisons were overcrowded with these "evil" black men—and still are. The entire country still battles the stereotypical prejudice that would have us all see in a young black man not the potential of a contributor to society but of a criminal, a commodity to be used to till the soil of the fields in the state penitentiary.

Louisiana has the highest prison-sentence rate in the nation. At Angola, the largest and bloodiest of all the nation's penitentiaries, the truth could be viewed, but not by the outside world. Angola's 18,000 acres of farmland are the site of an old plantation where, more than a century after Abraham Lincoln freed slaves, judicial slaves still toil in the fields from sunup to sundown. The original slaves who lived there and worked the land were purchased from the African country of Angola during the eighteenth century, thus the inspiration for the name. Then and now, the stakes are high: the crop is cash. The commodity is still human bondage and black athleticism.

This story shows how our system of justice was allowed to break down for one man and can fail us all, regardless of our guilt or innocence.

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