WILLIAMS’ GANG

William H. Williams operated a slave pen in Washington, D.C., known as the Yellow House, and actively trafficked in enslaved men, women, and children for more than twenty years. His slave-trading activities took an extraordinary turn in 1840 when he purchased twenty-seven enslaved convicts out of the Virginia State Penitentiary in Richmond with the understanding that he carry them outside the United States for sale. When Williams conveyed his captives illegally into New Orleans, allegedly while en route to the foreign country of Texas, he prompted a series of courtroom dramas that would last for almost three decades. Based on court records, newspapers, governors’ files, slave manifests, slave narratives, travelers’ accounts, and penitentiary data, Williams’ Gang examines slave criminality, the coastwise domestic slave trade, and southern jurisprudence as it supplies a compelling portrait of the economy, society, and politics of the Old South.

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JEFF FORRET

WILLIAMS’ GANG

A NOTORIOUS SLAVE TRADER AND HIS CARGO OF BLACK CONVICTS
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Abbreviations

AAS | US Slavery Collection, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts
ADAH | Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery
BLHBS | Baker Library, Harvard Business School, Cambridge, Massachusetts
BECHSA | Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society Archives, Buffalo, New York
LSA | Louisiana State Archives, Baton Rouge
LVA | Library of Virginia, Richmond
NA | National Archives, Washington, D.C.
NAMS | National Archives Microfilm Series
NARA | National Archives & Records Administration
NONA | New Orleans Notarial Archives
NOPL | New Orleans Public Library
RSPP, PAR | Race & Slavery Petitions Project, Petition Analysis Record
SHC | Southern Historical Collection, the Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
UNO | Supreme Court of Louisiana, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans
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When I finished my last book, I couldn’t decide which project to do next. About that time, a former high school classmate, Guy Hill, whom I hadn’t seen in twenty-three years, took a job a block away from my university, and so two former Calamus-Wheatland Warriors reunited and played catch-up over Japanese food, more than a thousand miles from where we first met. That conversation with Guy clarified matters for me and set this book in motion. Chronologically, then, Guy appears first in a long list of people I need to thank for their involvement in this undertaking.

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1 Williams–Milburn genealogy.