



The first documents of emancipated African American management

The letters of Benjamin Montgomery (1865-1870)

Nicole Jones

Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana, USA

Milorad M. Novicevic and Mario Hayek

University of Mississippi, Oxford, Mississippi, USA, and

John H. Humphreys

Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas, USA

Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to trace the historical roots of African American management by examining managerial practices and experiences described in the letters of Benjamin Thornton Montgomery, a former slave who eventually became manager and, ultimately, owner of the Hurricane plantation.

Design/methodology/approach – The method used is the historical archival method of analysis, primarily the examination of a series of letters written by Montgomery during the 1865-1870 time periods. These letters, which document the foundation and emergence of African American management during the Emancipation age, are for the first time presented as a source of management history.

Findings – Contrary to traditional thoughts of the insignificance of the plantation era to the history of management, the analysis indicates that Montgomery's management practices were quite sophisticated as they incorporated classical management principles of planning, delegation, leadership, and control.

Practical implications – This paper provides insights concerning the historical roots of management practices during the African American Emancipation period which could provide contemporary managers with a more realistic foundation of management practice.

Originality/value – The principal contribution of this investigation is the historical awareness of the documented roots of African American management represented by Montgomery's competence and perseverance to manage effectively while withstanding impeding racial attacks.

Keywords African American management, Slavery, Plantation, Archival, Modern history, Management activities

Paper type Conceptual paper



[...] the antebellum plantation [...] was a site of early development of industrial discipline [...] plantation management has passed the other two tests for inclusion in the history of management – the existence of a sophisticated set of managerial practices and a significant group of managers described as such at the time” (p. 1913) [...] this all points to a need to acknowledge race, and particularly anti-African American racism, as a continuing factor in the historical development of management (Cooke, 2003, p. 1915).

Management history research is curiously silent about the role of African Americans in the evolution of management thought and practice (Weems, 1997; Wren and Bedeian, 2009). This silence can be partially attributed to the fact that management historians paid scant attention to the periods of American slavery and American Emancipation (Novicevic *et al.*, 2010; Ransom and Sutch, 1977; Ruef and Harness, 2009). While some scholars have attributed this lack of attention to ideological reasons (e.g. Cooke, 2003), another valid, yet more benign motive is simply the lack of primary substantiation. Our recent discovery of Benjamin Montgomery's letters describing his plantation management practices may, however, provide crucial missing pieces of evidence about the emergence of African American management during the Emancipation time period post Civil War describing his plantation management practices. It should be noted however, that we use the term African American management taking a social identity perspective of African Americans as managers, rather than ascribing any set of practices as specific to African American managers.

The purpose of this article is to establish and trace the roots of African American management by examining managerial practices and experiences of Benjamin Thornton Montgomery, an emancipated former slave who eventually became a plantation manager and owner. We begin by providing some brief background information about Montgomery and his management practices. Next, we employ the historical method to analyze both primary and secondary sources describing those practices, so that we can evaluate the level of sophistication incorporated in his management performance. We then explore the challenges of racism faced by Montgomery, as well as his responses to these challenges. Finally, we outline the importance that Montgomery's letters hold for management history.

The managerial skills and practices of Benjamin Montgomery

Benjamin Thornton Montgomery was born as a slave in 1819 in Loudoun County, Virginia. In 1836 he was sold to Joseph E. Davis, brother to Confederate president Jefferson Davis and a retired attorney, to work on Davis's Hurricane plantation located near Vicksburg, Mississippi. Davis's practices of plantation management were modeled after Robert Owen's practices of industrial management. In particular, having read Robert Owen's (1813) book *A New View of Society*, and later having met Owen in person, Davis decided to reform his plantation management system by employing Owen's methods of harmonious cooperation (Hayek *et al.*, 2010). Like Robert Owen, whose utopian communitarian philosophy "sowed the first seeds of concern for the human element in the industry" (Wren and Bedeian, 2009, p. 66), Joseph Davis felt "obliged to consider not merely specifying the route to utopia but joining in the journey himself" (Kumar, 1990, p. 7). He had "a conviction that all men, white and black, were capable of living harmonious, productive lives through rational cooperation" (Hermann, 1990, p. 9). Davis thus became the genealogical link between Montgomery and management history because he was Montgomery's linking pin to Robert Owen.

Having received management training from Davis, and having successfully taken advantage of the opportunities for learning and entrepreneurship that Joseph had opened to him, Montgomery acquired many competencies atypical of those possessed by a slave. Owing to these competencies, he launched several entrepreneurial ventures. Montgomery's most outstanding venture was a convenience store stocked with

supplies for sale to the people living on the plantation and in the region. This store was such a success that by the late 1850s it had produced enough money for Montgomery to buy his freedom. However, as the conditions in the South, economic and otherwise, for freed slaves were poor, Montgomery chose to remain at the Davis plantation and continue as a manager running the Hurricane plantation.

Within a decade, Davis delegated complete responsibility to Ben Montgomery to manage the entire plantation. This entrustment proved to be mutually beneficial when in November of 1866 Montgomery purchased the plantation for \$300,000 after Davis had been forced to leave Hurricane during the Civil War (Hermann, 1990). Montgomery was one of few African American plantation owners, as at this point in time “only 7.3 percent of all farms, containing 6.7 percent of all farmland, were owned by black operators [...] the 1900 Census reported that 8.0 percent of all farms in the five major cotton states were owned by blacks, and this represented only 6.5 percent of all farmland. The inescapable conclusion which emerges from these facts on ownership is that by 1880 most blacks worked on someone else’s land” (Ransom and Sutch, 1973, p. 137). Nevertheless, Montgomery managed his plantation so successfully that he became one of the richest planters in the South in 1872. Unfortunately his health soon failed and he died in 1877.

The legacy of his plantation management practice has been preserved in the letters that Ben Montgomery wrote to Joseph Davis during the 1865-1870 time periods. Until now, these letters, which we contend are the first documented evidence of emancipated African American management, have not been examined as a source of management history. We argue that these letters are unique not only for their valuable content but also for their symbolic value because, in one instance, Ben Montgomery actually uses the term “management”, which is in all probability the first recorded use of this term by an emancipated African American manager.

African Americans’ role in management history: filling an important knowledge gap

Recognizing that management history reflects our shared meaningful interpretations of beliefs about the past of management practice and research (Novicevic *et al.*, 2008), we attempt in this paper to fill gaps in the knowledge about African Americans’ role in management history. Specifically, our discovery of Montgomery’s letters will help management historians examine the roots of African American management in the histories of management and revise traditional views and neglect of this phenomenon.

As the process of revising any tradition requires an adequate resolution of the tension between established tradition and novel beliefs, it should be examined with an appropriate philosophical and methodological rigor (Kieser, 1994; Lamond, 2006). First, we should keep in mind that “judgments about methodological rigor or appropriateness always depend on logically prior judgments about philosophical rigor or appropriateness” (Bevir, 2004, p. 34). Second, an appropriate explanation should be based on the examination of the newly discovered evidence against the traditionally shared web of beliefs (Bevir, 1999; Novicevic *et al.*, 2009a, b). Finally, as historical explanations are typically narrative in form, we should provide an inference to the best explanation about the roots of African American management based on available evidence in the form of Montgomery’s letters. Our resulting inference, we trust, will engender new historical knowledge. Specifically, we hope that our inference

about the roots of emancipated African American management will generate new historical knowledge based on our historical analysis of the available evidence extracted from Montgomery's letters.

To conduct historical analysis with the purpose of ascribing specific meanings to Montgomery's management practices based on his letters, we organized excerpts from his selected letters, and related them both to each other and to traditional management concepts. Principally, we examined Montgomery's management practices in terms of their origin and development, and linked them to the related "influence of ideas and concepts" (Leedy and Ormrod, 2005, p. 172), such as Owen's ideas, vertical integration, and planning/growth concepts. In the forthcoming sections of this paper, we describe how Montgomery practiced:

- *Authority and delegation of responsibility* through efficient organization of work and an improved ability to respond to others' competitive threats to lure his labor.
- *Chain of command* by assigning management functions to his family members.
- *Specialization of tasks/division of labor* by delegating to his son Isaiah Montgomery the tasks of managing the process of surveying fields and making contracts with lessees and hands.
- *Enforcement of organizational rules* within the administration of taxation, structure governance and jobs, and provide for the housing and education of his labor.
- *Continuous improvement* by planting improved strains of crops and by inventing a series of machines such as new cotton presses, a machine to drain cropland when there were floods that threatened the crops, a new gin design, sprinkler system and a new boat propeller.

By extending our research beyond chronological descriptions (Lamond, 2008) of Montgomery's practices, we conducted a type of genealogical research (Ruef and Harness, 2009) of his way of managing to trace the historical roots of emancipated African American management.

Overall, we examined in this study the genealogy of Montgomery's plans and practices of plantation management by interpreting historical data contained in his letters (see endnote for a detailed description of the primary data[1]). We use these letters as our primary source of data while various newspaper clippings and the book about Montgomery, *The Pursuit of a Dream* written by Janet Sharp Hermann (1999), are used as secondary sources of data. Montgomery's letters are stored as a part of the Joseph E. Davis Collection at the University of Mississippi's Department of Archives and Special Collections (after having been for decades deposited in a bank safe in Vicksburg, Mississippi). These letters were written in a legible manner with exceptionally well-structured thoughts for the time when less than five percent of emancipated slaves were even literate. Moreover, Montgomery provided an elaborate description of a wide array of technical, paralegal, and administrative skills that he had learned from Joseph Davis. Although management historians disagree in their assessments whether typical plantation management practices could be or could not be well developed and sophisticated enough to be comparable to industrial management practices (see Hayek *et al.*, 2010, for a synopsis of this debate), in the subsequent section

of this paper we examine the sophistication of Montgomery's management practices and develop an argument that Montgomery's practices were atypically advanced and sophisticated.

Analyzing sophistication of Montgomery's management practices

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the Industrial Revolution gave birth to the factory system and a mushrooming of textile mills. This system not only contributed to significant productivity gains but also engendered an impoverished and unhappy industrial workforce in need of responsive practices. The need for socially responsive manufacturing practices in textile mills was addressed by Robert Owen and Francis Cabot Lowell who strived to "create an American textile industry without creating an American working class" (Feller, 1995, p. 120) by creating socially harmonious working environments. Scholars have examined these two social experiments, but have been silent about Joseph Davis's and Ben Montgomery's attempts to transplant these practices into the environment of cotton plantations.

Scholarly silence about plantation management practices in general and Montgomery's practices in particular stems partially from the assessment of many management scholars that plantation management practice should not be deemed relevant to the evolution of business management (Aufhauser, 1973). The most prominent among them, Alfred Chandler (1977, p. 66), asserted that Southern plantations "had little impact on the evolution of the modern business enterprise" because "there was no meaningful separation of ownership and control" in plantations. Furthermore, with a "workforce small by modern standards", plantation management involved "almost wholly the supervision of worker".

During the mid 1800s, 4 million slaves that were managed in southern plantations (Cooke, 2003) represented a significant amount of investment in human capital. Moreover, the cotton and sugar plantations of the South represented some of the largest private enterprises of their time (Cooke, 2003). Therefore, even though Chandler's claims were likely valid for most archetypical antebellum plantations of the South, the Hurricane plantation was unique as an exemplary "highly-profitable plantation" (Bradley, 1981, p. D4). Contrary to Chandler's claims that were evidently ideologically motivated, Montgomery's practices of managing Hurricane incorporated social practices "inherited" from Joseph Davis and Robert Owen, including paternalistic leadership (Hayek *et al.*, 2010). In particular, Montgomery rejected the typical coercive practices of plantation management that "necessarily involved harshness maybe even cruelty so long as it was within the context of a strong sense of duty and responsibility towards those in dependent status" (Cole, 1953, p. 4). Rather, Montgomery would lend money to his employees even with the understanding that these loans would never be repaid (Hermann, 1990). In other words, "his goals were confined to the perfection of his dual role as prosperous planter-merchant and patriarchal leader of his model colony" (Hermann, 1999, p. 124). "As the leader of a potentially ideal community, Montgomery cherished hopes of instituting government by calm consensus as the residents demonstrated their responsibility" (Hermann, 1999, p. 135).

Although Montgomery often applied Owen's practices positing that work environment may shape workers' character, he did not share Owen's utopian prescriptions for the model of productive community without private property. Rather,

Montgomery's model of the plantation-made life for emancipated former slaves can be likened to Lowell's model for emancipated young female textile workers, which was successful during the early nineteenth century (Feller, 1995). During the years post Civil War however, Lowell's model suffered major setback and decline due to the inflow of immigrant labor that comprised more than 60 percent of the Lowell's workforce in the 1860s (Sobel, 1974). Whereas, during the same time period, Montgomery continued building, and maintaining his internal, and external communities (Hermann, 1990).

Montgomery used non-coercive practices and applied Lowellite and Owenite principles not only when managing Hurricane plantation, which was "rumored to be the third largest plantation in the state" (Hermann, 1999, p. 153), but also when managing his plantation-related ventures in the domains outside cotton, such as horticulture, mechanical arts, retailing, and stock management. In all of his Hurricane-related ventures, Montgomery applied the principles of "combining agricultural and industrial ethos to create favorable living and working conditions that would likely attract and secure retention of scarce labor" (Wren and Bedeian, 2009, p. 69). He applied these principles both internally to retain his labor force and externally to maintain important relationship and balance financial obligations. An excerpt from Montgomery's letter to Davis illustrates his management of the Hurricane-related financial affairs:

On the 5 June I was notified by the Sheriff of Warren County of my indebtedness for taxes on the plantations known as Hurricane and Briarfield for 1866. Not having funds in hand for the payment of some, I made arrangements with Scharff Brothers, of this city to pay it for me, which they did about the ninth inst. total amount including 5 percent for delay and \$2.00 for advertising (\$376.00) the previously named plantations were turned over to me on the first day of January last during the year 1866. I was a lessee and paid \$900 per acre for the land cultivated by me (Ben Montgomery Letters 1865-1870, June 25, 1867).

Over time, Montgomery established a reputation in the community as a businessman who took care not only of his financial obligations better also of his communal obligations (Hermann, 1999). Furthermore, Ben's "dream of a community was based on a belief in the ability of his fellow freedmen to improve through their own efforts" (Hermann, 1999, p. 169).

Montgomery managing the growth challenges of the plantation

Chandler (1977, p. 64) was correct in stating that the scales of typical plantations were smaller than those of the New England cotton mills in the nineteenth century because [in] "1850 only 1479 plantations had more than 100 slaves". However, the scale of the Hurricane plantation was clearly atypical:

Joseph Davis slave force at 226, while the 1841 tax rolls show only 168. By 1850, according to the census, he owned 242 slaves, and ten years later the total had reached 345. That put Davis in the top 12 percent Mississippi slave owners-those who held over 200 slaves. In fact he was one of only nine men in the state who owned more than 300 slaves (Hermann, 1999, p. 11).

Hurricane grew to this size because of Montgomery's skillful management, as well as to the fact that Hurricane plantation was located on a fertile Mississippi bottom land in an area that was among the most prosperous in the state (see Hermann, 1999, p. 24, for the 1850 US Census that identified the produce from the Davis Bend in 1850). To

sustain this growth rate, the most critical problem was how to provide a commensurate supply of labor for the plantation. This was a challenge because surrounding communities were trying to lure the best and most productive laborers from Hurricane. Montgomery explained this problem in a letter sent to Davis:

Parties from the other side of the river are still-hunting anxiously for laborers. Said to be much more land than labor on the Perkins places and parties in the neighborhood of Ashwood seem much in want. I think we shall have enough left to make something yet (JEDC, A-3 Folder, Montgomery's Letter of May 6, 1867).

To sustain his plantation's growth, Montgomery designed a sophisticated hierarchical structure of authority roles and delegated tasks (for a detailed account of the functions of the Montgomery family members, see Hermann, 1999, p. 159). An example of the chain of command in Hurricane's hierarchical organization of delegated management roles is the role of his own son, Isaiah Montgomery, who took charge of managing the task of surveying fields and making contracts with lessees and hands. Isaiah took an active part in the crops' cultivation, boasting that already in May his corn was "the finest in the Bend" (Hermann, 1999, p. 178). Later this experience proved to be valuable to Isaiah Montgomery when he became the founder of the African American community of Mound Bayou and the first ex-slave to serve in a state office.

Another factor that Montgomery had to manage was access to credit that was typically restricted for African Americans. "Without further investigation, the lender would immediately conclude that a black applicant was less credit-worthy than a white [...] as a result, the loan application of the black would either be denied or offered at terms too expensive to allow profitable farming" (Ransom and Sutch, 1973, p. 137). Over the years, Montgomery was however able to gain the confidence of lending institutions and providers so that "Payne and Huntington, the New Orleans factors, praised Ben's credit record and management ability [...]" (Ransom and Sutch, 1973, p. 155). By 1872 Montgomery had achieved an A credit rating.

Overall, Montgomery succeeded Davis as a successful planter capable of managing the complicated demands of Hurricane's growth. He successfully implemented not only Owens' vision of organizing work in a communitarian way aimed at constant improvement but also the process of the plantation expansion to pursue other business affairs, such as the store, the gin, and the press so that Hurricane soon evolved into a flourishing and lucrative rural commercial center (Hermann, 1999, p. 155).

Montgomery managing the planning challenges of the plantation

Most management scholars have argued that plantation management required little planning presuming that during the Emancipation Era these practices were too primitive and tedious when compared to those used during the rising industrial epoch of the late 1800s. In particular, Chandler (1977, p. 65) assumed that planning was very simple in this context, as during "critical periods of planting and harvesting" the "work of the planter the overseer and the drivers" became little more than the development of routines. Hurricane plantation, however, required a structure involving a sophisticated division of labor to support the implementation of Montgomery's plans. Montgomery needed this structure to organize the administration of taxation, structure governance and jobs, and provide for the housing and education of his labor (*New York Times*, 1866, December 2). The structuring of these diverse activities was based on his

knowledge, expertise, and, particularly, conceptual skills that he used to implement the process that today we would refer to as strategic planning process (see Humphreys, 2004, 2005).

Montgomery's broader vision, which guided his planning process, was to advance new opportunities of unique social elevation for the members of his freedmen community, particularly those opportunities that involved the innovative expansion of his plantation's operations (*New York Times*, 1866, December 2). The main opportunity was related to the "introduction of a new arrangement for the cultivation of the soil" that was to contribute "largely to the improvement of the interest of both the white and black races in the state" (*New York Times*, 1866, December 2). His long-term plan was to exploit the opportunity for expansion into the industrial domain, as affirmed by Hermann (1999), p. 153):

Ben's mechanical interest, combined with his keen analysis of worldwide markets, led him to suggest a novel improvement that is compatible with modern economic theory. The first year after the war he forecast a continuing downward trend in cotton prices and announced that, if he remained on the Bend he expected to "introduce the Loom and encourage mechanical industry as well as agricultural" [...] He proposed by expanding vertically to capture the added value of manufacturing cloth as well as producing cotton.

The foremost components of Hurricane's expansion success, which Montgomery pointed out in his correspondence with Davis, were organizational rules guiding an efficient organization of work and an improved ability to respond to others' competitive threats to lure his labor:

Everything in good working order and [...] work industriously and systematically to make the most we can [...] (JEDC, A-1 Folder, Montgomery's Letter of November 25 1866).

They are working industriously (JEDC, Folder A-5 Montgomery's Letter of February 18 1870).

There are now parties on the Bend persuading the people that they can do better elsewhere, I am not disposed to persuade any onto remain who think they can do better. I am satisfied that a sufficient number will voluntary remain to cultivate both places and any other work [...]. I only hope to be able to fulfill my promise to them (JEDC, A-1 Folder, Montgomery's Letter of November 25 1866).

Ben Montgomery also implemented continuous improvements by planting improved strains of crops and by inventing a series of machines such as new cotton presses, a machine to drain cropland when there were floods that threatened the crops, a new gin design, sprinkler system and a new boat propeller. Montgomery's constant planning and implementation of improvement eventually helped Montgomery & Sons to win the first prize for the quality of cotton at the St Louis Fair. Six years later Montgomery participated in an international exposition where his cotton was considered to be of the highest quality on exhibition (Hermann, 1999).

The ultimate success of Montgomery's strategic planning depended not only on his labor's ability to produce high quality produce and bales of cotton but also on his social skills to streamline the Montgomery & Sons retail store's relationships through collaboration with the store's vendors and partners. This success also required Montgomery's ability to "win the support of important and influential individuals through persuasion rather than direct confrontation, however righteous he believed

was his specific cause” (Hermann, 1999, p. 94). In other words, to secure success of his plans for Hurricane and the related ventures, Montgomery needed not only the human capital of his labor but also the social capital of his community. Therefore, “Ben was careful to include these new leaders in his projects to increase the freedmen’s autonomy” (Hermann, 1999, p. 67). As a result, “the key to Ben’s success was his unusual ability to win the patronage of important whites while maintaining a modest, self-effacing demeanor. He gained his ends by subtle persuasion rather than direct challenge, however righteous he believed his cause.” (Hermann, 1999, p. 94)

Montgomery managing the challenges of racism

To rationalize commercially advantageous slavery, it was necessary for the nation to create and perpetuate racial myths, one of which was that blacks were congenitally lacking in the attributes required for a free and independent existence. These myths endured long after the institution they were designed to justify, and the result has been disastrous (Bradley, 1981, p. D4).

The full potential for Montgomery’s achievement of success was unfortunately limited by the exclusionary context of racism that he encountered (Hermann, 1980). During the post-War Reconstruction era, opportunities for economic emancipation of African Americans were not easily opened in the newly created Union, primarily because of the widespread stereotyping of African Americans as ignorant and undisciplined and thus unsuited for managerial roles (Berlin, 1998; DuBois, 1932; Hermann, 1999). African Americans were therefore seldom granted actual equality of opportunity (Ransom and Sutch, 1973).

Even with a last name such as Montgomery, Ben still often received inequitable treatment from both “feudal” whites from the North, where he had worked as a carpenter, and the “manorial” whites from the South where he managed the Hurricane plantation (Hermann, 1980). The challenge that Montgomery encountered was not only the overt racism of those pursuing competing opportunities (e.g. those claiming that a black ex-slave could not be trusted to manage the local franchise of the federal postal system), but also the covert racism that accompanied the installation of the governmental Freedmen Bureau (Hermann, 1999). As Hermann (1980, p. 312) pointed out, “historians of the Reconstruction era might expect an agent of the Freedmen’s Bureau to support the freedmen, whose interests he was there to protect, against the native white planter; however, in at least one dispute in Mississippi, such stereotyping would be inaccurate”[2].

The Freedmen Bureau was established during the Civil War to help the newly liberated slaves to become self-sufficient and integrated citizens (Ross, 1978). The Bureau’s activities included: land re-distribution, housing, and education of ex-slaves in vocational skills. However, in the eyes of some Mississippian ex-slaves the Freedmen Bureau’s officials had latent racial attitudes that sometimes appeared very similar to those of the southern master class before the war (Hermann, 1980). For example, not only that freedmen were forced to live in “overcrowded rundown homes, survive on rations, dress in rags and search around for equipment that the Bureau frequently confiscated” (Hermann, 1999, p. 58), but also the Bureau officials sometimes exhibited coercive behavior, as described in one of Montgomery’s letters, “Captain Norton said if they did not give up their cotton he would take it by force. The cotton was taken and we had nothing more to do with it” (JEDC, Folder 8, Freedmen Bureau).

Ben Montgomery was however successful in responding to the threats of racism. Specifically, “the key to Ben’s success was his unusual ability to win the patronage of important whites while maintaining a modest, self-effacing demeanor. He gained his ends by subtle persuasion rather than direct challenge. He did his best not to antagonize anyone, recognizing the extreme precariousness of his position as an ambitious black businessman in a racist, white world” (Hermann, 1980, p. 332).

The specific means by which Benjamin Montgomery responded resourcefully to the threats of racism was to use Joseph Davis’s social influence as a source of his countervailing power. Specifically, whenever Montgomery was treated unfairly because “men of affairs had discounted him for his color or position, he had always had recourse to his powerful ally and friend, Joseph Davis” to lobby for his cause (Hermann, 1999, p. 72). An illustration of the unfair treatment that he endured can be found in the following excerpt from a letter written to Davis to elicit his help:

It is still rumored that the land will be retained by the Government but we shall go on with our work [...] ordered to discontinued, should like to [...]. dividing the land as early as possible so that the changing may be commenced. Will you phrase mistrust on whether or not I will be correct in doing so or will it be necessary for me to wait the movement of the Bureau. Further delay for the much that we have to do will be damaging to an irreparable extent (JEDC, Folder A-2 January 8, 1866).

The previous excerpt also reflects Montgomery’s feeling of social disenfranchisement engendered by the Bureau’s unfair treatment. Inequitable treatment of successful freedmen by the Bureau officials was not uncommon because they were notorious for expressing publicly contempt of successful freedmen in general and Montgomery in particular. Evidently, the officials could not genuinely accept him as socially equal. The following passage describes Colonel Samuel Thomas’s jealousy and hostility towards Montgomery as an archetypical successful Freedman:

The real puzzle in the behavior of Samuel Thomas was his hostility toward Benjamin Montgomery. Thomas frequently exhorted the freedmen to work hard and become self-sufficient, for he deplored ignorance, laziness or any other deviation from the universally accepted [...] In short Benjamin Montgomery personified what should have been Thomas’s ideal freedman; yet Samuel Thomas hated him [...] Did this black success story disturb his own deep-seated racial preconceptions? Was his paternalistic benevolence challenged by the equality implicit in Montgomery’s business ability (Hermann, 1999, p. 91)?

A more specific confirmation of the Bureau officials’ intolerant authoritarianism and discriminatory attitude towards Montgomery is provided in the following excerpt from one of Montgomery’s letters written to Davis:

I will state that a very large majority of the Freedmen, being warned by the manner [...] which their cotton was ginned and disposed of in 1864 [...] we were denied the use of the gin under fears of partiality. While the more favored parties (whites) were permitted to control the gin until the ginning from 50 to 100 bales, buying cotton of the poorer [...] at the same time. Which could be ginned without delay (JEDC, Folder 1, Montgomery’s Letter undated).

Montgomery was evidently disappointed in the outcomes of the Bureau’s espoused quasi-communitarian experiment of bringing emancipated freedom to the community of ex-slaves. His unmet expectations may partially explain why Montgomery still needed Davis’s defense and why he was motivated to write a series of letters to Davis asking for his lobbying support during the Emancipation time period (Hermann, 2007).

Discussion and conclusion

This article provides a historical explanation how Robert Owen's socially harmonious and individually humanistic practices of industrial management were initially adopted by Joseph E. Davis to management of his Mississippi Hurricane plantation, and later applied by Benjamin Montgomery, Davis's successor and the first emancipated African American manager. We have argued that our historical knowledge about the background and implementation of these management practices, which are described in Ben Montgomery's letters written to Davis during the 1865-1870 time periods, is of seminal relevance to the history of emancipated African American management because this history has been virtually ignored as a topic in scholarly journals.

We have attempted to uncover this historical knowledge by analyzing over 400 pages of Benjamin Montgomery's letters. By filling in the void in our knowledge about Montgomery's practices as the historical roots of African American management, we want to include this uncovered knowledge into our collective representation of management's past in a way that brings about a new meaning of that past. Specifically, we want to "normalize" management's foundation with the hope that Montgomery's example of emancipated African American management practice will become meaningfully reenacted and recreated in management's traditions and reconstructed in the collective memory of management historians. As our reanimation of the past through our historical analysis of Montgomery's letters did not result from the "presence of history" but rather from the "absence of history" relative to African American management, we hope that it will promote new ways of viewing management's past in terms of not only on "what happened in the past" but, more critically, also in terms of "how it is transferred and narrated in the present" (Antoniou, 2007, p. 102).

To promote these novel views, in our analysis of Montgomery's letters we did not follow the typical outcome-based narrative of management history, which assumes a teleological progressivism of management practices (King and Haveman, 2008). Rather, we approached Montgomery's seminal historical case history of African American management through the lens of a redemptive history by "using the past to free up rather than constrain interpretation, to make new meanings rather than reiterate meanings that were ostensibly fixed in the past" (Kapczynski, 2005, p. 1172). The redemptive approach to Montgomery's role in the history of African American management allowed us to go beyond the issue of the denial of slavery in management studies raised by Cooke (2003) and end management history's silence about the post-slavery period of Emancipation when the pioneering African American management practices of Benjamin Montgomery emerged.

New ways of interpreting historical knowledge about the roots of emancipated African American management documented in Montgomery's letters may help us enhance our understanding of the relationship between industrial management and Montgomery's practices, while recognizing the salient context of racism that he encountered and which he managed to overcome in a resourceful way. Specifically, although "Ben Montgomery and his sons were becoming the undisputed leaders of the black community on the Davis Bend plantation who were spreading a cooperative spirit inherited from Joseph Davis and Robert Owen" (Hermann, 1999, p. 100), they still had to be combative against the racist critics in order to remain successful in their ventures.

In summary, historical awareness of Montgomery's competence and perseverance to manage effectively while withstanding the unfair attacks may help us remember the history of management more responsibly rather than allowing the legacy of Ante-bellum slavery and the roots of emancipated African American management to be shunned from management studies. Moreover, historical awareness brought about by the redemptive historical approach (Shore, 2005) employed in this article may help us create a genealogical link among the events of the past, the meanings of the present, and the hopes of the future of African American management. In this way, our redemptive approach will play a remedial role relative to the traditional works in management history, which do not grant any significant historical legitimacy to African American management, reminding management historians that "slavery is still the touchstone of all of our discussions about race in America – as it should be, because race was born out of slavery. It is our nation's original sin" (Gross, 2008, p. 321). However, we acknowledge that "the emphasis on racial thought and continuing search for the elusive moment when ethnocentrism was transformed into racism threaten to blind us to other factors that sometimes complemented, sometimes contradicted, and always complicated the development of colonial racial orders" (Spear, 2007, p. 588).

Future research efforts should focus primarily on the transcription and textual analysis of Montgomery's letters. The studies resulting from these efforts might produce new narrative explanations about the appropriate interpretation and categorization of Montgomery's writings and intent. Furthermore, these studies might uncover new factual relationships that highlight continuities and discontinuities in the narration of Montgomery's letters. As a result, our narrative developed in this manuscript and future narratives of future studies will become rival narratives that will need to be compared in terms of accuracy, extensiveness, and consistency.

Notes

1. The letters are stored in two boxes. (In the attempt to assist future researchers, we will describe the contents of boxes One and Two generally). Box One contains nine folders of Ben Montgomery's letters written during the 1865-1870 time periods, while Box Two contains legal suits and tax records related to Davis's attempts to regain his land. The main themes of the letters are the physical condition of the land, the court system, the Freedmen Bureau control, and Montgomery's financial obligations. Folder A1 of Ben Montgomery's letters, which covers the year 1865, contains six letters addressing the themes of slave's health, farming implements, and the matters of the plantation. Folder A-2 contains 29 letters dated 1866 concerning Montgomery's struggle with the Freedmen's Bureau, his collaboration with various vendors, and his struggles to regain his ownership of the equipment on the plantation.

Folder A-3 has 36 letters all dated in 1867 pertaining to Montgomery's financial obligations, the physical health of the slaves, difficulties with labor, and the overall conditions of cotton and other produce. Folder A-5 contains 17 letters and three additional envelopes, which are dated 1870. These letters address the issues of the slave labor, the slave's health condition, the condition of the crops, and levee construction. Folder A-8 contains undated letters presumed to have been written late in 1865, while Folder A-9 contains letters dated in 1865. The letters and documents contained in these two Folders pertain to many disputes with the Freedmen's Bureau. Benjamin Montgomery's letters are currently in the process of being transcribed, but were not transcribed in 2009 when this research was conducted.

2. Given the limits of historical objectivity, we want neither to endorse Whig antiseptic interpretation of benign and tidy history of the Freedmen's Bureau (Bentley, 1955; Vann Woodward, 1988) nor to endorse the post-revolutionist view of its history which applies to contemporary norms of racial justice to racial relations during the Era of Reconstruction/Emancipation (Rabinowitz, 1978; Litwack, 1979). Rather, we subscribe to the "New Freedmen's Bureau Historiography" (Cimbala and Miller, 1999), which "acknowledges the elements of paternalism and prejudice that animated bureau officials and the legal and practical constraints under which they worked but nonetheless recognizes their assistance to former slaves in negotiating the transition from bondage to freedom" (Harrison, 2006, p. 77).

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Corresponding author

Mario Hayek can be contacted at: mhayek@bus.olemiss.edu

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