

Decision Activity: Quamino Somerset County, NJ 1789



Quamino was born near New Brunswick, New Jersey in 1762. Young Quamino had a complete family unit when he was living in Somerset County. Despite describing Quamino as “compliant,” his contemporary biographer William Allinson described a horrific episode where young Quamino was forced to watch a fellow enslaved person burned at the stake as punishment for alleged crimes. At no point in the memoir or in any other documentation is Quamino described as rebellious or uncooperative. Much of this is attributed to his religious conversion and subsequent piety. Allinson essentially uses Quamino as the model version of a benign, non-threatening Black man as a means of condemning the institution of slavery, consistent with Allinson’s abolitionist views. Allinson’s book is described as a memoir, including numerous quotations directly from Quamino, but neglects to offer a physical description of the man, the names of his siblings, or many of his inner emotions and rationale for his behavior.

At age nine, Quamino was essentially rented out to an enslaver in Poughkeepsie, New York. He was separated from his family and upon the commencement of the Revolutionary War was unable to have any communication with his “master” (and thereby his family). From roughly age 9 to 18, he remained in New York, but in 1780 was unexpectedly returned to his original enslaver and reunited with his family. Allinson wrote, *“Overcome with this too sudden announcement, he burst into a violent and uncontrollable fit of crying, and for hours cried aloud as though he had been beaten -- unable to answer questions, or to stay his emotions at the kindest efforts to pacify him.”*²

How do you think each of the following may have contributed to his uncontrollable response to the news?

¹ Frontispiece of William Allinson, *Memoir of Quamino Buccau, A Pious Methodist*

² Allinson, page 6.

- A. Shock that his situation would ever improve.
- B. Joy at the prospect of being reunited with his family.
- C. Separation from his family caused emotional deprivation.
- D. The experience of enslavement is a form of mental and physical torture.

Consider the implications of each of the items in a response of two or three sentences.

Back in Somerset County, Quamino had a religious experience, claiming that God had spoken to him, thus beginning his period of devout faith in the Methodist religion. His enslaver looked suspiciously upon enslaved people's faith, believing it could interfere with maintaining a degree of ignorance and thus make them less "serviceable" as workers. He even suspected Quamino's position was a pose, designed to gain a level of respect from others in the community. Consequently, he would criticize and may have beaten Quamino for participating in religious services, but Quamino accepted the consequences and maintained his personal beliefs.

As there is only one source for this information, we have no idea of how sincere Quamino's religious conversion was, but either way, one could argue that maintaining his faith was an exercise of autonomy and personal agency.

Two Options to Consider:

- A. Quamino was wholly genuine in his religious conversion, and was willing to deal with any obstacles in his path to exercise his faith.
- B. Quamino was less than 100% genuine in his conversion, but believed that some degree of deception would provide him some degree of social standing.

Describe in two to three sentences how each of the options would mean that Quamino was exercising personal agency.

In 1788, he married Sarah, an enslaved woman who lived nearby. She was soon sold and moved five miles away, allowing them to see one another as infrequently as once a week. When Quamino's enslaver died around 1789, he was passed onto one of the enslaver's sons. Several years later, he was beaten by his enslaver. Quamino told him he refused to work for him further, a tactic that some other enslaved people had used to demand being sold to a new owner. In some locations, the relationship between enslaver and enslaved was perceived as a sort of social contract with obligations flowing in both directions. "Unjustified" abuse might be grounds for "slave quitting" depending on local customs. Although enslaved people might be aware of instances of slave quitting via word of mouth, nothing was in the law, thus employing this tactic was enormously risky for Quamino.

Consider the possible outcomes of this risky decision.

Three Possible Outcomes to Consider:

- A. His enslaver could have rejected the claim and then worsened his treatment of Quamino.
- B. His enslaver could agree to sell him to a new enslaver whose treatment of Quamino could be the same (or worse).
- C. His enslaver could agree to sell him to a new enslaver whose treatment of Quamino would be an improvement.

Which of the following seems the most likely outcome?

If your choice was either A or B, would Quamino have regretted his decision of refusing to work?

Why was it difficult for Black Americans to enjoy the ideals of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness as stated in the Declaration of Independence?

Quamino was sold to a new enslaver, who did not seem to have used physical violence against those he enslaved. Quamino even arranged for his new enslaver to purchase Sarah, allowing the couple to live together as husband and wife. In 1806, Quamino was manumitted through an elaborate process that included having to testify before a committee to demonstrate that his freedom would not be a burden upon the state of New Jersey. Sarah died in 1842 and Quamino lived to around 1850 (age 88). They had at least two sons together, although it appears at least one of them was sold as an infant.