
Quamino, Duchess

(c. 1739–29 June 1804),

Edward E. Andrews

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slave, renowned pastry maker, and entrepreneur, also referred to as “Charity,” was born on the Gold Coast of Africa to a minor royal family. In the middle of the eighteenth century she was taken captive, sold into slavery, and transported to Newport, Rhode Island, where she became a domestic slave in the home of William Channing, a prominent attorney.

Like many of that port town's female slaves, Quamino would have been responsible for a variety of activities that maintained the household. One job in which she excelled early was baking, a skill which would hold her in good stead in later years. The historical record does not indicate what kind of personal relationship Quamino had with her master, but it is significant that she converted to Christianity while working and living with the Channing family. Her exact motives for doing so are not certain; she may have perceived Christianity as a way to mitigate the harshness of slavery, as a possible tool with which to gain her freedom, or as a spiritual response to her experience with slavery. She attended Ezra Stiles's Second Congregational Church with the Channings but, like most blacks in white churches, was probably relegated to the back or balcony of the church. By 1769 Quamino had married John Quamino, an African slave owned by Captain Benjamin Church. John Quamino later purchased his freedom with the earnings from a winning lottery ticket and volunteered for an African evangelical mission (which never took place because of the American Revolution). The couple had at least three children—Charles (born in 1772), Violet (1776), and Katharine Church (1779), though it is not certain whether the couple ever cohabitated.

The American Revolution disrupted Quamino's life in many ways. Indeed, no period was more bittersweet for her than between 1779 and 1780. In the early autumn of 1779 she learned of her husband's death. He had enlisted as a privateer, presumably in an effort to earn enough money to purchase his wife's freedom, and had died in battle with the British in August. Now suddenly alone, Quamino might have been comforted somewhat by the birth of their new child, whom she named Katharine Church and baptized in October. In addition, Quamino apparently had secured her own freedom, and probably her children's, by 1780.

It is still not entirely clear whether she was manumitted, but local folklore suggests that she baked her way to freedom, using the Channings' oven to make pastries that she sold to local Newporters. Like many newly freed blacks, she was hired as a servant in the same household that had previously enslaved her, and she was entrusted to be caretaker to the family's newest member, William Ellery Channing. Born in 1780, the young Channing would later gain fame as a prominent Unitarian clergyman and abolitionist. Indeed, local folklore suggests that Quamino, now a freewoman, had a

significant influence on the impressionable Channing's attitudes toward religion and slavery as he was growing up, and Channing's well-documented antislavery sentiment may well have germinated under Quamino's care.

In addition to taking care of the Channings' children, Quamino was quite busy looking after her own and establishing an independent household, which she had done by 1782. Unfortunately, in January 1792, her daughter Violet passed away at the age of fifteen. Quamino would have been quite familiar with the funerary practices of Newport's black community, as she was at that time a member of the Pall and Biers Society, a branch of Newport's African Union Society, which subsidized funeral expenses for free blacks in need.

As Quamino was forming an independent household and becoming a more active member in the community, she was also gaining local fame as “the most celebrated cake-maker in Rhode Island” (Channing, 171). She was known for her frosted plum cakes, and she apparently both delivered cakes to her clients and catered popular events like the subscription assemblies that took place in Newport during the winter. Local folklore has it that Quamino still used the Channings' large oven to bake for these events, and she often expressed her gratitude by inviting members of that family over to her home for tea. Though she left no records in her own words, baking probably fulfilled several financial, social, and emotional needs. First, it had the obvious consequence of granting her a niche in the food market that she could exploit to her own financial advantage. Her culinary creativity also offered her prestige and recognition in a society where most whites denied it to blacks. Finally, baking might have served a therapeutic purpose for Quamino because she could be alone with her work, contemplate the loss of her husband and the fate of her children, and reflect on both the trials and blessings that characterized her life.

Though the reason for Quamino's death near the age of sixty-five is still unclear, Newporters long recalled the large funeral the community gave her. Fittingly, it was William Ellery Channing who wrote the effusive epitaph on the Quamino's grave, which still stands in Newport's Common Burial Ground. The epitaph praised Quamino for her “distinguished excellence” and “Exemplary Piety.” The stone obituary also described her as “Intelligent, Industrious, Affectionate,” and “Honest.” While blacks and whites usually had separate funerals in Newport, her death offered the community an opportunity to join together to reflect on Quamino's life and influence.

Further Reading

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Melish, Joanne Pope. *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and “Race” in New England, 1780–1860* (1998).

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See also

Quamino, John <[https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/
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