Black women’s history is a revealing witness to two intertwined categories of identity that have profoundly shaped the course of American history: race and gender. Study of this field demands that students confront racial identity as something formed in dialogue with other aspects of identity including gender, class, religion, sexuality, regional loyalties, and national affiliation. Over the semester, students will become familiar with the major issues in black women’s history and develop a historical perspective on race and gender as things which are socially constructed as opposed to unchanging, natural, or rooted in physical difference. Thus, in addition to analyzing the various historical conditions under which black women have labored for self-definition and autonomy, we will seek to understand the ways in which raced and gendered identities and stereotypes, including those of the Wenches, the Witch, Mammy, Sapphire and the Welfare Queen, have been invented, opposed, and reinvented in the American context.

Engaging with some of the newest literature in African-American Women’s History, we will examine how black women grappled with issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality and struggled to create lives that reflected their own understanding of liberty, power, equality, rights, and citizenship. Using primary documents and secondary sources, we will study the past through the words of those who lived it and sharpen our ability to evaluate, analyze, and interpret primary source materials and the arguments of leading historians in the field of black women’s history. Topics for discussion will include African life and culture; Caribbean and colonial bondage; antebellum enslavement and resistance; the lives of free black women; gender and family life; labor and sexuality; religion and activism; migration; the creative arts; Civil Rights and Black Power; affirmative action; education, health care and poverty; crime; and identity politics. Attendance is mandatory. Class time will focus largely on discussions based on the readings, as well as informal lectures, and students will be evaluated through their participation in discussions in addition to their performance on a combination of short primary source analyses and lengthier response papers. This is an upper-level class and the lectures and readings presume a prior knowledge of basic US history. It is thus recommended that students have taken H105 and/or H106 (US History Survey, Part I and Part II) before taking this class.

Professor Myers is an historian of the black female experience in the United States, and her research interests revolve around issues and ideas of race, gender, freedom, and citizenship, and the ways in which these constructs intersect with one another in the lives of black women in the Old South. Her forthcoming monograph from UNC Press, Negotiating Women: Race, Gender, and Freedom in the Nineteenth Century South, is a social history illuminating the lives of free black women, both legal and de facto, in Charleston, South Carolina, from 1790-1860. At its heart, the project analyzes the tactics that black female Charlestonians utilized to acquire, define, and defend their own vision of freedom, methods which included the acquisition of wealth, networking with people in positions of power, and utilizing the state’s judicial apparatus. Examining life, liberty, and ideas about civil rights from the perspective of those invested with the least formal power in the Old South, this study concludes that antebellum black women used all the resources at their disposal to enjoy a freedom of their own design as opposed to one that was shaped for them by white southerners. Drawing on family papers, legislative documents, probate records, parish registers, census data, tax lists and city directories, this project thus restores black women to their rightful place as social, economic, and political actors in the pre-war South.