Of the estimated eleven million slaves forcefully transported from Africa to the New World between 1500 and 1870, at least two thirds ended up settling in Latin America, building new lives under bondage in places like Brazil, Argentina, Cuba, and Peru. Africans and their descendants resisted, reshaped, and eventually helped overthrow racial slavery through a long and protracted process culminating in Brazilian abolition in 1888. This course explores the history of slave emancipation from the point of view of the enslaved. Placing black men and women at the center of struggles for freedom in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we will focus on individual and collective strategies deployed by them to navigate a political landscape characterized by the rise of global capitalism, abolitionist discourses, and popular struggles over rights to citizenship. We start with the world created by the Haitian Revolution in the late eighteenth century, explore the multidirectional flows of black activism all over the Atlantic, and conclude at the dawn of the twentieth century with a discussion of the meanings of freedom in post-emancipation societies. Some of the topics covered by this course include: the transnational nature of slavery and abolition, slave organizing and strategies, warfare and emancipation, literacy, family life, and the era of “Second Slavery.” Although focusing on Latin America, this course looks at a broad range of black experiences in comparative perspective, including the United States.

Slaves rarely left behind a trail of documents of their own making. They are typically represented in sources generated by the very process of enslavement, such as bills of sale, ship manifests, travel narratives, and masters’ wills. So how does one write about their thoughts, fears, and desires? What does it take to overcome the methodological challenges present in the archives? How can
primary sources be used to convey the voices of the illiterate and dispossessed? How do differences of power among individuals, communities, and countries affect what societies actively remember and forget about the past? This class seeks to answer these questions by addressing slavery both as lived experience and as a topic of historical knowledge. Together, we will learn how to engage in close textual readings of primary sources, assess the messages, implications, and silences embedded in historical documents, and conduct research by using library databases of academic journals, government and book collections available online and at Princeton libraries.

This seminar is designed to build or enhance students’ abilities to write a 25-30-page junior paper on any topic regarding the history of slave emancipation in the Americas. The goal is ultimately to make competent, creative and confident historical researchers out of every participant. Classes are structured around a series of tutorials, workshops, and scaffolded assignments that will build toward and help you write your research paper.