Using the Library for Academic Research

My submission was written during the fall semester of 2018 for HS 390, but I began my research for it the summer before when the topic, the Underground Railroad in the Upper Peninsula, was suggested to me in the course of writing a different paper. The majority of maps indicate that the Underground Railroad in Michigan was confined to the southeast corner of the state, but there was one that had been published by the Detroit News, and another that was referenced in the New York Times, that showed a route through the UP. This seemed like the type of thing I would have heard about previously, if true, but the sources were too respectable for me to dismiss them out of hand, and I decided to look further.

My first step was to search the general catalog of the Olson Library and the finding aid for the CUP&NMU Archives; I also checked JSTOR, which I accessed through the Olson Library website. I was unable to find what I was looking for—a general search for “Underground Railroad Michigan” brought up sources referring to the Lower Peninsula, while a search for “Underground Railroad Upper Peninsula” brought me results about railways in underground mines. I suspected that I wasn’t looking in the right way, so I decided to get help. I felt confident that the faculty and staff would be willing to assist me because they had often approached me in the past whenever I looked as if I were puzzled by or interested in something in the Library.

I went to the Library’s customer service desk and asked if there was a reference librarian available, and I was directed to Professor Strahan’s office. Professor Strahan was happy to walk me through the use of the Electronic Reference Sources page of the Library’s website, and to give me some pointers for improving my searches. I then talked with Glenda Ward of the Archives, who I knew to be interested in local history and a frequenter of local symposiums. She...
was also eager to help, and provided me with several books and some good advice on how to conduct my research. I was an employee of the Archives at the time, and while I was not an expert, I was familiar enough with the collections to know that they didn’t contain any direct evidence of an Underground Railroad presence.

Unfortunately, I was unable to locate any primary sources or academic articles supporting the thesis that the Underground Railroad was present in the Upper Peninsula. Even indirect supporting evidence, such as census records, was thin on the ground. The Peter White Public Library had a few books in their local history collection that theorized the presence of the Underground Railroad in the UP, or discussed the historical presence of African Americans, but these books were of poor scholarly quality, and their bibliographies lead nowhere substantial.

I did find books in the Olson Library’s collection that were useful in understanding travel and living conditions in the Upper Peninsula in the mid-nineteenth century. Karen Rinne was also instrumental in helping me request a microfilm loan from the Library of Michigan, as I was attempting to track down the original source of a rumored escape slave in Mass City. While I was unable to find solid evidence supporting the veracity of the maps I came across last summer, with the help of the faculty and staff of the Olson Library and the CUP&NMU Archives I am confident that there is no evidence available, at the moment, to find.