This project aims to use a self-designed locative media application created via AppFurnace as a method of exploring the intersecting natural, agricultural and industrial histories of the geographical area now known as the Tifft Nature Preserve in Buffalo, NY. Through the curation of archived audio files currently held at the Research Library of the Buffalo Museum of Science, which document the oral histories of individuals possessing personal insight into Tifft’s history, as well as self-recorded readings of related newspaper clips spanning over several decades from The Buffalo News and poems from Jonathan Skinner’s Birds of Tifft (2011), I hope to produce a complex arrangement of personal, industrial and poetic narratives introduced through sound. When experienced in the environment of the Tifft Nature Preserve itself, the result should deepen the meaning of the landscape by calling attention to its multifaceted identity and utilize audio to expose and engage with the natural and cultural memories contained within the soil itself.

This project will attempt to juxtapose the natural essence of the landscape with the various roles it has taken on in the hands of its human inhabitants, with an ultimate goal of presenting a holistic spatial identity where both man and nature are irrevocably intertwined. The framework of my research into these roles derives primarily from three texts, two literary and one digital: Tifft Farm: A History of Man and Nature, compiled by Theresa L. Wolfe and the Tifft Farm History Committee (1984), Tifft Nature Preserve Management Plan, written by David J. Spierling, and the Tifft Nature Preserve’s own website, maintained by its parent organization, the Buffalo Museum of Science. All three sources offer insight into what is a long and remarkably varied history of Tifft’s 264 acres. From the knowledge of their authors collectively, I’ve been able to trace the transformation of the site from its acquisition by the Holland Land Company in 1796 (and subsequent extinguishment of its former Indian title), up through its current use as a popular bird watching venue, due to its plethora of marshy and wooded terrain so suitable for larks, buntings, blue herons, and the like.

Recognition of the site under the name Tifft began in 1848, after entrepreneur and Buffalo newcomer George Washington Tifft purchased a tract of what had been the Holland Land Purchase and converted it into a large and highly successful dairy farm. Due to its convenient situation both geographically and historically—in close proximity to both the highly trafficked Lake Erie and the Buffalo River, and during a period of rapid economic growth for the city following the completion of the Erie Canal—Tifft Farm continued to expand into commercial endeavors, renting land to interested proprietors and making it a regional center of livestock trade during the 1850s. After the 1865 opening of the New York Central Railroad in Buffalo diverted the livestock trading route, the farm’s agricultural success began to decline and prompted Tifft to sell the land off in parcels for industrial use, most notably to the Lehigh Valley Railroad. Lehigh Valley Railroad’s possession of a significant portion of Tifft Farm marked a new epoch in the site’s history, as steer and dairy cattle were replaced by lumberyards and grain elevators. The Tifft Farm’s connection with the City Ship Canal made it an ideal location for not only a shipment center but a transportation route; Lehigh Valley continued to expand its business
on the waterfront until it met its end in 1929, when the Great Depression encouraged its decline and forced it to abandon its endeavors completely by 1946, when Tifft’s access channel to the City Ship Canal was filled in and Lehigh Valley sold the site to the city of Buffalo.

As the Tifft Farm site gradually fell into industrial disuse, the previously maintained channels gathered silt. The growing desolation of the land as proprietors relocated elsewhere, coupled with regular locomotive traffic continuing to passing through, made Tifft particularly popular in the 40s and 50s with both train-hopping hoboes and anyone with refuse to unload. Remarkably, despite the rather seedy character lent to the space by its multitude of squatters and garbage heaps constantly aflame, locals still managed to utilize its large ponds for swimming and fishing in the summer and ice skating in the winter.

In 1951, the city began landfilling in the southwest corner of Tifft Farm. Four years later, when the deed changed hands again to Republic Steel, the landfill was covered by an added layer of dumped railroad slag. By the end of the decade, the portion of canal running between Tifft’s Beth Pond and Lake Kirsty (called so after the daughters of the site’s namesake) had been filled as well, and the city of Buffalo had purchased dumping rights back from Republic Steel. Over the course of a century, the land of Tifft had stood witness to a city’s economic boom and the lows of its aftermath—and in consequence, its natural landscape was altered nearly beyond recognition. For years Tifft Farm remained a compromised environment, until Buffalo purchased the title outright from Republic Steel in 1971. With the acquisition came the announcement of a plan to fill Tifft’s natural marshes with solid waste from nearby Squaw Island, in order to make room there for a new sewage treatment plant. At the suggestion of some environmentally concerned locals, however, the city ultimately revised its plan so that Squaw Island’s waste would still be brought to Tifft but contained as a handful of large, rounded mounds in its southwest corner. The waste piles would then be covered with soil transported from the northern section of Tifft, and a drainage system installed as well. The rest of Tifft’s acreage would be cleaned up and finally allowed to return to a natural ecological balance. The site was reopened to the public in 1976 as Tifft Farm Nature Preserve (the ‘Farm’ to be dropped later), and continues to offer itself as a much-needed pocket of green in a post-industrial city where concrete reigns. The mounds filled by the city from 1973-1975 have been reclaimed by nature and incorporated into the landscape, today covered in tall grasses ideal for the plentitude of wildlife species which make their home there.

The environmental evolution of the Tifft site, spurred by man’s will for agriculture, industry, and recreation, provides a complex arena in which to examine the ways people engage with their environment, and how their environment responds to their presence. This project will be a channel through which to reflect the symbiosis which emerges between man and nature, urbanity and wilderness, bodies and space. Given the immensely nuanced history of the landscape, at once natural and manmade, I think it to be more suitable to work as a curator of existing documented material, audio and otherwise, to pay homage to the journey Tifft Nature Preserve has taken in order to exist as it does now. As part of the 1984 project undertaken by Theresa Wolfe and the Tifft Farm History Committee to produce Tifft Farm: A History of Man and Nature—which has proven a most valuable resource to me in my own research—several oral histories were collected from individuals with insight into Tifft’s historical transformation. These
histories exist in both taped and transcribed formats at the Research Library of the Buffalo Museum of Science, the parent organization of Tifft Nature Preserve since 1982. To augment this project, I’m reaching out to the museum in hopes of obtaining permission to either use excerpts/clips from the recorded interviews themselves, or obtaining permission to record a reading of them myself from transcript excerpts. Citations will be provided as GPS-triggered text on the mobile app interface, so that the participant can locate on-screen the source of the audio recording being played at any given time. Though I have yet to gain access to all eleven of the oral histories documented by Wolfe and her associates, her text *Tifft Farm: A History of Man and Nature* offers a few select quotes on topics such as the resident hobos of Tifft in the 30s, the recurring presence of the fire department due to flammable landfill, and the experience of working on a ship docked off of Tifft Farm for the winter. The diversity of personal stories offered by these oral histories is crucial to my project, as they explore man’s interaction with environment not just on the grand level of industry but through individual eyes, or rather, voices. The toll economic expansion at large has had upon the terrain will also need to be dealt with; for this, I am using archives from the University at Buffalo and the Buffalo History Museum to locate *Buffalo News* snippets and advertisements relevant to the industrialization of the Tifft site, particularly material published during its ownership by the Lehigh Valley Railroad. Selected news clips will be read by myself and recorded as audio to be arranged alongside the oral history sound files, so that narratives are provided on both the personal and public levels. Citations will likewise be available on-screen at the time the respective audio file is triggered to play. The third major element of my audio will derive from a slender volume of poems entitled *Birds of Tifft*, published by Jonathan Skinner in 2011. Skinner’s work captures the ecological beauty of Tifft while simultaneously considering the implications of man’s involvement with the space itself; excerpts appropriate to the wintry season in which the project presentation falls are to be selected, read and recorded by myself, with proper citation readily available for participants via the interface. My hope is that through the thoughtful selection, editing and arrangement of personal history, public document and ecological poem, I will be able to produce a complexly interwoven narrative which asks its listener to merge the seemingly fractured identities Tifft has historically adopted and consider their implications in equal measure, thus opening a dialogue to confront the relationship between human endeavor and the spaces in which it unfolds.
Projected Timeline

Week 9 (Oct. 21): Project proposal complete
Week 10 (Oct. 28): select material to be used from research; record sound files; finalize walking route at Tifft
Week 11 (Nov. 4): Coordinate files with locations on trail; on-site test of app-in-progress
Week 12 (Nov. 11): make adjustments to recordings or app as needed; on-site test of app-in-progress
Week 13 (Nov. 18): make adjustments to recordings or app as needed; final test of app-in-progress
Week 14 (Nov. 25): Project complete and ready for final critique; work on documentation
Dec. 16: Documentation completed and submitted

Working Bibliography

“City to pay $4000 a month for dumping on Tifft land.” Buffalo Evening News, April 22, 1959.


Related Works


A gps-triggered sound walk as part of a larger project entitled ‘Scape the Hood in San Francisco. Land & History creates regions of audio and visual content accessible via mobile device, working to reveal topographical changes in the Mission Bay since the 1850s and ultimately suggesting “that the past and the present exist as a two-way continuum”.

- Walking Through Time (Edinburgh College of Art, University of Edinburgh): www.walkingthroughtime.co.uk

A smartphone app which allows users to explore the history of various English landmarks by clicking pinpoints on a map as they also navigate the space in real time. When a point is selected, the app provides related text, images of historical documents or photos, and/or audio.
Through the Golden Gate (Andrea Williams, 2013)
www.aplaceforsustainableliving.org/ai1ec_event/through-the-golden-gate/
www.listeninglistening.com

A North Oakland-based soundwalk which utilizes recorded interviews with local residents and business owners in order to address questions of ecological sustainability and human rights in a neighborhood experiencing rapid economic and developmental changes.