

ALABAMA REGISTER OF LANDMARKS AND HERITAGE

Nomination Form

AR 9/30/99

1. Name

historic Norman Smith Pottery
and/or common Norman Smith Pottery

2. Location

street & number 5031 Alabama Highway 183 West
city, town Lawley ---vicinity of
state Alabama county Chilton zip 36793

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use	
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input type="checkbox"/> public	<input type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> museum
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial	<input type="checkbox"/> park
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational	<input type="checkbox"/> private residence
<input type="checkbox"/> site	Public Acquisition	Accessible	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> entertainment	<input type="checkbox"/> religious
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government	<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> other:

4. Owner of Property

name Linda Smith Phone number 334-366-5686
street & number 5280 Alabama Highway 183 West
city, town Lawley ---vicinity of zip 36793

5. Floor plan & site plan. Use space below to sketch floor plan and site plan or attach additional sheet.

See additional sheet

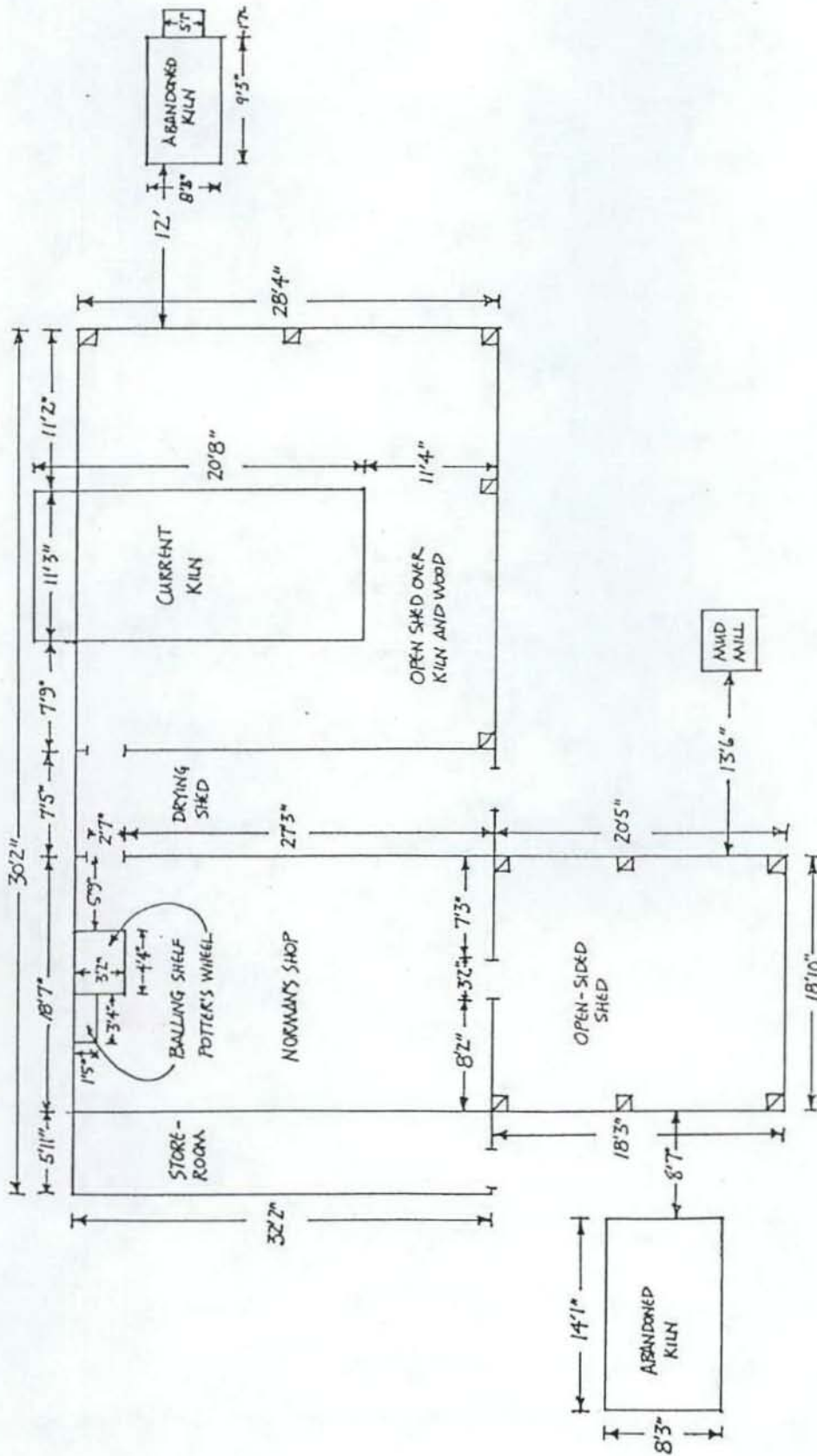


PLATE 301 Overall layout of Norman's operation.

6. Description (See attached instructions for specific guidelines.)

Condition excellent good fair deteriorated ruins unexposed**Check one** unaltered altered**Check one** original site moved date _____

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance.

The Norman Smith Pottery is located in the Talladega National Forest on Alabama Highway 183, five miles west of Highway 82 near Maplesville. The pottery is situated approximately 20 feet off of the north side of Highway 183 on 3.1 acres. Smith owned over 80 acres, but his lands were divided among his children after his death. The Norman Smith Pottery is comprised of four structures: a log building (built by Norman Smith and a hired laborer in the mid-1930s), two brick kilns, and a mud mill. The main pottery shop is a log building with a front gable roof of standing seam metal. There is an off-centered wood door and a hole cut into the logs with a fixed glass insert that serves as the only window. A shed addition was added where additional pottery could be stored prior to firing. A door opening is adjacent to the door of the main entrance to the shop. The main pottery shop served as Smith's pottery workshop where he turned the pottery and then stored the unfired pieces on shelves that are suspended from the ceiling. To help dry the pottery in the cooler months, Norman fashioned a heating device that provided warmth for him as well as to the unfired pieces of pottery. Norman cut a gasoline barrel in two and placed the halves end to end. He built a fire in one end of the barrel and attached a flue to the other side. The heat would radiate out creating a warm environment. The main shop is covered with a gable canopy of standing seam metal. The largest kiln Smith built in circa 1940 is located to the east of the main shop. This brick tunnel kiln features an arched entry way leading into the kiln. The firebox (the area where the fire was built) resembles a moat and Smith had to place a piece of wood across the firebox in order to walk across it and enter the kiln to place all the pieces in it to be fired. The kiln is so large that he could almost stand straight up in it. The main kiln is covered with a wooden shed canopy with recently replaced standing seam metal. To the east of the main kiln is a second kiln also built by Smith in the circa 1940s. This secondary kiln is smaller than the main kiln and was used by Smith later in his life when he fired his pottery less often. The kiln is also tunnel shaped with an arched entry. It is covered with a wooden canopy that is in the process of being re-covered with standing seam metal. The mud mill, built from wooden 2 x 4's still stands in the yard. The mud mill's four sides are equal in length, width and height. It is open in the middle except for the large wooden pole that protrudes out from it. At the end of the pole that is inside the mud mill, there are metal blades that mixed the clay and water together. The other end of the pole extended out and was originally attached to mules, and later to a tractor. The process involved completing 150 revolutions to ensure the right consistency of the clay before it could be turned on the wheel. The evidence of thousands of revolutions is still apparent in the bare areas of ground that surround the mud mill.

Since Smith's death in 1990 the pottery has not been in use. No alterations have been made to any of the buildings or structures. It is currently owned by Norman Smith's daughter, Linda Smith. To the east of her father's pottery she has built her own shop where she makes pottery. Ms. Smith is working to restore all buildings and structures associated with her dad's pottery because they are suffering from neglect. She has replaced one metal canopy roof that covers the main shop and she is currently working on replacing the metal roof of the canopy that covers the kilns. Students from the University of Montevallo are interested in helping Ms. Smith fire the smaller kiln with her dad's unfired pieces he never had the chance to fire.

7. Significance (See attached instructions for specific guidelines.)

Period	Areas of Significance-Check and justify below			
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> social/
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> art	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> humanitarian
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> theater
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)

Specific dates 1932-1959

Builder/Architect Norman Smith,

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph).

CRITERION A: ART

The Norman Smith Pottery is a good example of the folk art tradition that existed in rural Alabama in the early to mid twentieth century. Norman Smith began his operation in 1932 as major technological changes swept the South. By the time Smith began operating, "folk pottery had undergone an irreversible transformation in its diversity and role within the community."¹ Smith was a traditional potter who existed right at the time when the potter's role was changing. Rural potters faced a changing market and had to produce new items to meet new demands of their customers. What had once been an operation producing utilitarian clay items shifted into a market characterized by non-utilitarian ware such as flower pots, strawberry planters, ornamental Rebecca pitchers, and ant defenders. Technological innovations were slower to reach the rural south than they did in the industrial urban centers of the north. The rural south relied on the traditional potter to make preserving jars, churns, jugs, and chamber pots for example, a lot longer into the 20th century than his northern counterparts. Smith was a traditional folk artist in the sense that he was not formally schooled on the high art styles. His was an oral tradition handed to him from itinerant yet highly talented potters who traveled across the rural south searching for work. Willett and Brackner suggest that the "traditional Alabama potter did not think of his product as art; nor did the consumer of his product. The folk potter was in the business of making and selling vessels that would best serve the functions for which they were intended. The aesthetic that dictated the form a vessel might take was a group aesthetic, shaped in that culture's collective mind, not in the mind of the individual potter."² Though Smith did not think of himself as an artist, his ware reflected the folk art tradition of rural Alabama in the early to mid 20th century.

CRITERION A: INDUSTRY

The Norman Smith Pottery is a good example of a facility for pottery production in rural Alabama. Smith began farming his eighty acres in 1932 but soon realized he could not raise a family with his farming profits. Having knowledge of the pottery tradition, he and his first wife began a pottery operation. Norman ceased farming on a large scale and instead concentrated on making and selling pottery as his main source of income.³ Smith participated in every aspect of his operation from building his own shop and kilns, to digging and processing the

¹Henry E. Willett and Joey Brackner. *The Traditional Pottery of Alabama*. (Montgomery: Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, 1983).

²Ibid., 11

³*Foxfire 8*, edited by Eliot Wigginton and Margie Bennett. (New York: Anchor Press, 1984), 263.

By 1980 there were only four traditional potters remaining in Alabama and one of these potters was Norman Smith.⁹ As a traditional folk potter, Smith was a rarity in rural Alabama during a majority of the 20th century. He made pottery for over sixty years. His work as "folk art" appeared in the Smithsonian Institute and he has been recognized as an important traditional folk artist in countless scholarly and non-scholarly publications.

CRITERION C: ENGINEERING

The Norman Smith Pottery features two extant brick kilns that are good examples of the construction method of kilns by traditional folk potters. These two kilns were the result of handed down traditions and experimentation. Smith built many kilns before he perfected the process. His first kiln steamed and never reached the proper temperature. His next kiln was a round one with a central chimney and five fireboxes that could not be fired fast enough. Others collected moisture or did not draw well, or the bricks could not withstand the heat and melted. His brother helped him build the present kiln out of any kind of bricks they could find. It was built on the base of an older kiln and worked well. To burn the kiln with pine sapling and slabs, Norman and Irene Smith stoked the fire from opposite ends of the firebox door. When the firing was finished, he stopped up the kiln tightly and let it cool for three days before unloading it.¹⁰ Smith's kilns are of the railroad tunnel variety which is built on top of the ground with side walls 18 to 24 inches high. The arch was built first, and the front--or breast--end and the chimney added last.¹¹ His kilns were rectangular, very different from round Northern kilns and could have been fashioned after those found in colonial Virginia, Germany, France, or England.¹² Southern potters would often build and rebuild kilns repeatedly until they found the exact results for which they were searching. A new kiln could be constructed in four days to a week. Often the same homemade clay bricks that were used in the early kiln were recycled in the new, supplemented as needed by commercially produced red clay bricks.¹³

On Smith's kilns, brick columns are built out from the sides, backed by the poles that support the shed roof over the kilns. The dome of his main kiln is higher than average, so he could stack his ware higher and keep from hitting his head. He could nearly stand upright inside.

HISTORICAL SUMMARY

Alabama's statehood in 1819 brought an influx of settlers from the Piedmont areas of the Carolinas and Georgia. These families settled in Alabama's Black Belt and Coastal Plain, bringing with them the Anglo-American and African-American cultural traits of their ancestors. Since the first English experiment at colonization in America at Jamestown, there has been a pottery tradition in America. The folk pottery tradition began here and was later transplanted to other regions of the county as settlers migrated. There was a vast difference between Northern and Southern potters however. Alabama potters were not concerned with outside recognition of possible artistic accomplishments as evidenced by the absence of a maker's mark. This is one characteristic which separated the small time rural Alabama potter from his counterparts in the North and abroad who competed for large markets.¹⁴ In the late 19th and early 20th centuries potters began manufacturing non-utilitarian items instead of

⁹*Willet and Brackner*, 42.

¹⁰Sweezy, Nancy. *Raised in Clay: The Southern Pottery Tradition*. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press for the Office of Folklife Programs, 1984). 4-5.

¹¹*Foxfire* 8, 147.

¹²*Ibid.*, 75.

¹³*Ibid.*, 147.

¹⁴*ibid*, 27.

the essential clay items they had made for hundreds of years. A slow decline of traditional potters began in the South during this time.

Traditional potters have been central components in Alabama communities. The presence of potters in communities reflected changes occurring on the Alabama landscape. Alabama's economy had undergone a transformation in the first half of the nineteenth century. What had once been a frontier economy based on fur trapping and nomadic tendencies shifted into an economy based on permanence in location and agriculture. Subsistence farmers in the 19th century required means to preserve food to last into the colder months to supplement their diets. They found potters at the wheel ready to turn out preserving jars, churns, jugs, and other utilitarian products farmers needed. The warm and humid climate of the south coupled with the lack of refrigeration technologies enabled the potter to secure a special and necessary place in southern culture. By the mid 19th century, the "southern pottery tradition had reached its peak and then declined only slowly. The 1930s saw a number of active folk potters still working in the South"¹⁵ Later, the introduction of glass containers, the icebox, refrigerator, and indoor plumbing destroyed a portion of the potter's market. Potters expanded their product lines to compensate for their now non-essential wares (i.e. chamber pots, preserving jars). Potters began to produce less utilitarian objects such as flower pots, spittoons, ornamental Rebecca pitchers, and ant defenders."¹⁶

In 1904 Norman Smith was born on a small farm in Perry County, Alabama. His father worked the farm that required the work of all the Smith children. Norman and his siblings did not acquire much of an education since they all had to help out on the farm. Norman's exposure to pottery making came at an early age. His father had worked a few days around a pottery cutting wood and doing odd jobs. Smith said that "got him [his father] a little interested [in pottery making]."¹⁷ After 10 year old Norman watched his father form a clay teddy bear and a saucer, then bake them in a wood stove, the seed was planted in Norman to become a potter. In 1921 when Smith was 17 years old, his father obtained a second-hand potter's's wheel. Smith began to "teach himself to turn and later learned more by working with an itinerant potter."¹⁸

In 1932 Smith married Mae Terry and moved to the nominated property which then totaled 80 acres. He and his wife farmed for the first year of the marriage but Smith admitted that "he was about to starve to death along then, farming."¹⁹ He decided that he would begin a pottery operation to provide additional income. He continued to farm during the day, saving the cool mornings and evenings to turn pottery. Norman eventually abandoned farming and concentrated solely on making pottery. Norman and Mae Smith divorced not too long after their 1932 marriage.²⁰ In 1940, he married a second time. Norman and Irene Smith worked in the pottery together for over 40 years.

Smith always made his ware of a local clay, using a single source at a time.²¹ According to Linda Smith, her father would dig the clay from what is now the Talladega National Forest. When the forest became federally

¹⁵Ibid., 10.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷*Foxfire* 8, 261.

¹⁸*Raised in Clay*, 3.

¹⁹*Foxfire* 8, 263.

²⁰Interview with Linda Smith, daughter of Norman and Irene Smith, September 1999.

²¹*Raised in Clay*, 3.

protected lands, he had to find other sources for clay.²² After the clay was dug from the earth, it was placed in the mud mill, a wooden container where the clay would be mixed with water using horses and mules at first and then replaced by tractors and trucks. After about 150 revolutions the clay would be ready for turning on the wheel. Smith then "carried the clay to the shop in a wheelbarrow, threw it down in a corner, and covered it with burlap sacks."²³ He turned flower pots, churns up to twenty gallons, teapots, mugs, pitchers, jugs, and even jugs formed into piggy banks. After firing the ware in the kiln, he would set the pieces in front of his shop where people would stop and buy his products.²⁴ In the early years of Smith's operation, he would travel to nearby cities such as Birmingham, Selma and even Atlanta to sell his pottery to local hardware stores and five and dime stores. Sometimes he would "get home with no money at all."²⁵ Norman sold his pottery for very low prices, asking 10 cents for a gallon churn when others would sell a similar item for \$8. When asked why he kept his prices so low, he replied, "I will sell at a low price, cause I was raised up in hard times."²⁶ One author writing about Smith's cheap prices acknowledged that "most seem price-ideas from the mid-1930s. But Mr. Smith wants to share and he wants to continue his life and he has known it. The price of the piece is a part of his message--but the buyer is receiving a bargain. He takes home tradition, the handed-down heritage of the old-world craft, the real artifact, reflective of other eras, but beautiful in its matter of fact simplicity and truth of manufacture."²⁷

Up until Smith's death in 1991, he continued to make pottery, though not at the same speed as he did in his younger days. Smith died of emphysema due to years of working around dust and smoke. He admitted that years of making pottery "made me sick. I've got emphysema now. It's caused from this clay or something. It's best not to be in too much dust. Every time I clean my kiln out, I go to the house the next day and spit out all that stuff from my lungs--black stuff, ashes. It's a wonder I've lived as long as I have. But I have. I'm thankful for that."²⁸

Norman Smith did not make his living in a conventional manner. He was able to raise a family with the profits he received from selling pottery. He got pleasure from taking clay, adding water, beating it, shaping it with his own hands on his wheel, baking it in his homemade kiln and selling to the public. He was a rarity in Alabama, as a potter and as an artist.

²²Ibid., July 1999.

²³*Raised in Clay*, page 4.

²⁴*Common Clay*, page 79.

²⁵*Foxfire 8*, page 264.

²⁶*Raised in Clay*, page 6.

²⁷*Common Clay*, page 13.

²⁸*Foxfire 8*, page 266.

8. Major Bibliographical References

Counts, *Charles Common Clay*. (Atlanta: Droke House/Hallux.).

Foxfire 8. Edited by Eliot Wigginton, Margie Bennett. (New York: Anchor Press, 1984).

Kenny, John B. *Pottery Making*. (Radnor, PA.: Chilton Book Company, 1976).

Sweezy, Nancy *Raised in Clay: The Southern Pottery Tradition*. . (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institute Press for the Office of Folklife Programs, 1984).

The Selma Times-Journal. Lifestyle Section. Sunday, July 3, 1977.

Willett, E. Henry and Joey Brackner *The Traditional Pottery of Alabama*. . (Montgomery: Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, 1983).

9. Geographical Data

Acreage of nominated property 3.31

Quadrangle name Oakmulgee

Enclose map showing location of property. (city or county map, state highway department map, or USGS map)

10. Form Prepared By

name/title Linda Smith/Lee Anne Hewett (Alabama Historical Commission)

organization _____

date August 19, 1999

street & number 5280 Alabama Highway 183 West

telephone 334-366-5686

city or town Lawley

state AL

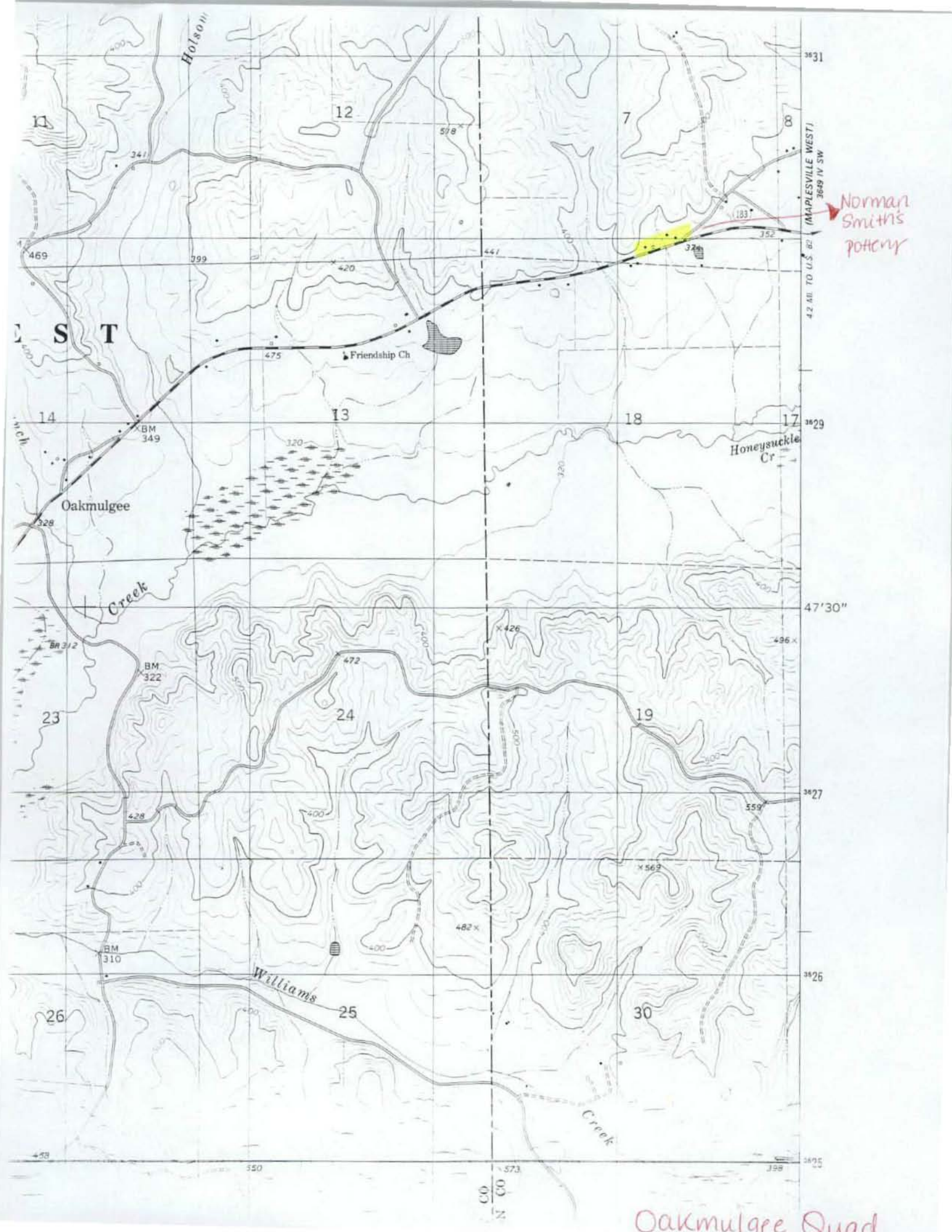
zip 36793

11. Please submit color slides of the property with this form.

Color slides are essential to the review process.

12. Please return ALABAMA REGISTER form and documentation to:

Alabama Register Coordinator
Alabama Historical Commission
468 South Perry Street
Montgomery, Alabama 36130-0900



Norman Smith's pottery

Oakmulgee Quad