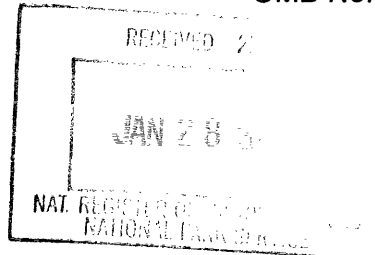


United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service



**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
REGISTRATION FORM**

1. Name of Property

historic name Nettles, Isaac, Gravestones

other names/site number N/A

2. Location

street & number E side Mt. Nebo Rd. (Co. 867), 0.5 mi S of Co. 19 not for publication N/A
city or town Carlton vicinity X
state Alabama code AL county Clarke code 025 zip code 36545

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this X nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property X meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide X locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

[Signature] 1/20/00
Signature of certifying official Date

Alabama Historical Commission (State Historic Preservation Office)
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria.
(See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of commenting or other official Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

- I hereby certify that this property is:
- entered in the National Register
 See continuation sheet.
 - determined eligible for the National Register
 See continuation sheet.
 - determined not eligible for the National Register
 - removed from the National Register
 - other (explain): _____

[Signature] _____
Signature of the Keeper Date of Action
Edson H. Beall 2/24/00

Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

USDI/NPS Registration Form

Property Name Nettles, Isaac, Gravestones

County and State Clarke County, Alabama

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply.)

Category of Property
(Check only one box.)

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

- private
- public-local
- public-state
- public-Federal

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Contributing

Noncontributing

4

4

_____ buildings

1 sites

_____ structures

_____ objects

1 Total

Name of related multiple property listing
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

Historic and Architectural Properties of Clarke County, Alabama

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: FUNERARY graves/burials

Current Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: FUNERARY graves/burials

7. Description

Architectural Classification (Enter categories from instructions)

N/A

Materials (Enter categories from instructions)

foundation _____

roof _____

walls _____

other CONCRETE

Narrative Description (Describe the historic and current condition on continuation sheet/s.)

USDI/NPS Registration Form

Property Name Nettles, Isaac, Gravestones

County and State Clarke County, Alabama

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria (Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- X A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
X C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations (Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

- X A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
B removed from its original location.
X C a birthplace or a grave.
X D a cemetery.
E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
F a commemorative property.
G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance (Enter categories from instructions)

ART
ETHNIC HERITAGE: Black

Period of Significance 1933-1946

Significant Dates N/A

Significant Person (Complete if Criterion B is marked above) N/A

Cultural Affiliation N/A

Architect/Builder Nettles, Isaac, Sr.

Narrative Statement of Significance (Explain significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

- Previous documentation on file (NPS) N/A
preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
previously listed in the National Register
previously determined eligible by the National Register
designated a National Historic Landmark
recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #
recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #

- Primary location of additional data:
[X] State Historic Preservation Office
[] Other state agency
[] Federal agency
[] Local government
[] University
[] Other
Name of repository
Alabama Historical Commission

USDI/NPS Registration Form

Property Name Nettles, Isaac, Gravestones

County and State Clarke County, Alabama

=====
10. Geographical Data
=====

Acreage of Property less than 1

UTM References (Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

	Zone Easting	Northing	Zone Easting	Northing
1	<u>16</u>	<u>417440</u>	<u>3468140</u>	3
2	_____	_____	4	_____
	_____ See continuation sheet.			

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

=====
11. Form Prepared By
=====

name/title Blythe Semmer, Historian and Trina Binkley, NR Reviewer

organization Alabama Historical Commission date August 24, 1999

street & number 468 S. Perry Street telephone 334-242-3184

city or town Montgomery state AL zip code 36130-0900

=====
Additional Documentation
=====

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A **sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

Additional items (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

=====
Property Owner
=====

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name Mt. Nebo Baptist Church/Rev. King David Jackson

street & number P.O. Box 24 telephone 334-246-7280

city or town Gainestown state AL zip code 36540

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 7 Page 1

Name of Property: Nettles, Isaac, Gravestones
County and State: Clarke County, Alabama

7. NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION

The Isaac Nettles Gravestones are located in the Mt. Nebo Baptist Church's cemetery near the southern tip of Clarke County, where the Alabama and Tombigbee Rivers merge. The site is just west of the crossroads community of Carlton on County Road 19 and lies down a dirt road off the road to Hal's Lake. Mt. Nebo is in one of the most isolated areas of a county that remains very rural. The church and cemetery are surrounded by commercial stands of pine. There is no landscaping to speak of save grass around the church and cemetery and a cedar tree and a couple of shrubs growing within the cemetery.

- 1. The **cemetery** is located east of the church building along the north side of Mt. Nebo Road. Many of the burials throughout the cemetery are marked by concrete slabs or other concrete markers. There are a variety of markers, although most are simple and date from the 1950s forward. **NC**

The nominated objects in the Mt. Nebo cemetery are four concrete markers made by Isaac (Ike) Nettles, Sr. These markers are death masks cast in concrete that memorialize the buried persons. Isaac Nettles made the death masks by having his subjects press their faces in a box of sand while still living. From this mold he cast the concrete "masks." They were composed of concrete, paper, and wire, according to a local resident and relative of the maker.¹ All of the Nettles stones are endangered by the effects of weather on concrete.

- 2. **Gravestone of Angel Ezella Nettles.** This marker bears the image of the woman's face,. Although her nose is deteriorating, the image of her face is still quite clear. Her stone bears the handwritten inscriptions "Sis Dollie" and "Angel." Angel Nettles was a relative of Isaac Nettles. **C**
- 3. **Gravestone of Selena Nettles.** This stone for the sculptor's mother was originally surmounted by a torso model to accompany her death mask. The statue has deteriorated and was toppled by Hurricane Frederic in 1979. The torso now lies in three large pieces on the ground. The woman's name may be properly spelled Celina if a later concrete slab marker at the base of the torso statue is correct. Perhaps added because of the damage done by the hurricane, this slab, with a hand-drawn cross and hand lettering, reads "Celina Nettles, Born in 1800s, Died January 1940." The marker is dated Jan. 22, 1983 in the lower right corner. Locals report that the statue also originally contained the deceased's hair, although it is no longer there. **C**
- 4. **Gravestone of Korean (sometimes spelled Cora) Nettles.** This stone marks the July 6, 1933, burial of Isaac Nettles' wife. The marker features the faces of their three daughters, Pauline, Marie, and Clara, arranged asymmetrically on a narrow headstone with an inscription to the right of center. All three faces reveal traces of hair, which was probably added originally in a manner similar to the Selena Nettles stone. The inscription says "mother" rather than Korean Nettles' name. Pieces of clear glass are found imbedded in the concrete around the upper portion of the stone. The upper two of the three faces are still relatively intact. The one on the bottom of the stone has experienced heavier weathering and is losing some detail. **C**
- 5. **Gravestone of Manul Burell.** This local man died (Aug.?) 9, 1946. His marker features his death mask above a hand-drawn shirt and collar. The upright marker sits atop a concrete slab. The inscription "He is at rest" is written across the shirt front. The concrete at the top of Mr. Burell's head has been damaged by vandals, but the rest of the design is intact. **C**

Archaeological Component: Although no formal archaeological survey has been made of this area, the potential for

¹Ed Williams, "Cemetery Art," *EnviroSouth* 9 (Fall 1985), 16.

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section 8 Page 2

Name of Property: Nettles, Isaac, Gravestones
County and State: Clarke County, Alabama

subsurface remains is good. Buried portions may contain information that may be useful in interpreting the entire area. There may have been other Nettles gravestones that are no longer extant within the cemetery. A concrete block, for instance, next to the Selena Nettles stone could indicate the location of another Nettles marker. Fragments of thin molded concrete found elsewhere in the cemetery could reveal the location of others. Surface archaeology could yield more conclusive information about the potential existence of remains from additional Nettles stones.

8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

CRITERION A: ETHNIC HERITAGE

The Isaac Nettles Gravestones are eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A for their association with the ethnic heritage of African Americans in Clarke County. The concrete grave markers made by Isaac Nettles are representative of a unique burial tradition in this particular community. Among other traits, a "frozen face" motif has been identified by folklorists as characteristic of African-derived symbolism in African American art.² Mt. Nebo's death mask gravestones inform about the way a talented resident expressed creativity and memorialized the dead within the economic limitations of a black community in Depression-era rural south Alabama.

CRITERION C: ART

The Isaac Nettles Gravestones are further eligible under Criterion C for their importance to the folk art tradition of Clarke County and Alabama. Isaac Nettles is probably unique among African American folk artists in Alabama for his use of death masks in decorating gravestones. Nettles creativity found expression in an affordable medium, concrete, that is used for most of the markers in the Mt. Nebo Cemetery. Casting death masks in concrete allowed Nettles to incorporate sculpture into gravestones without the expense of marble or training as a stone sculptor.

Criteria Consideration A: Religious properties. Although the nominated property is owned by a religious institution, it derives its significance from artistic qualities and ethnic associations that are unrelated to its religious purposes.

Criteria Consideration C: Birthplaces or graves. Although the nominated property contains graves, it derives its primary significance from artistic qualities and ethnic associations and the distinctive design features of the gravestones.

Criteria Consideration D: Cemeteries. Although the nominated property is part of a cemetery, it derives its significance from artistic and design qualities, as well as ethnic associations, that are important in Clarke County's folk art tradition and African-American history.

HISTORICAL SUMMARY

Little is known about the creator of the unusual Mt. Nebo death mask gravestones, Isaac (Ike) Nettles, Sr. The isolation of Mt. Nebo Church has preserved some of the mystery that surrounds these unusual markers. The community of Carlton was originally known as Hal's Lake, the name of a long and winding lake that feeds the Tombigbee River in the southern tip of Clarke County. Hal's Lake was named for a runaway slave who built a stockade by the lake and successfully eluded captors

²Patrick McIntyre, "Isaac Nettles, Visionary Grave Sculptor," unpublished paper submitted to University of Southern Mississippi's Piney Woods Folklore Project, files of Alabama Historical Commission.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 3

Name of Property: Nettles, Isaac, Gravestones
County and State: Clarke County, Alabama

in the canebrake for a number of years.³ Carlton's settlers originally took advantage of the plentiful fish and game in the land between the Alabama and the Tombigbee. Cotton farmers found the land fertile and created large farms in this part of southern Clarke County. In the early twentieth century, logging operations took over as the principal industry in the area, and pine plantations continue to cover much of the land here, including the area up to the perimeter of Mt. Nebo Cemetery and the church lot. Sportsmen still take advantage of the fish and game in the area. Mt. Nebo is located midway between Carlton and Oven Bluff on the Tombigbee River, the site of a fishing camp and a former river landing. The Mt. Nebo Baptist Church congregation was formed after the Civil War during the final third of the nineteenth century. The present building was built shortly after the turn of the century and is fairly typical of rural black churches in Alabama.⁴ Although the grave markers in the cemetery date from the 1930s to the present, the cemetery was used for burials since the church was constructed. Earlier graves were either not marked or marked with materials that gradually deteriorated.

A great-nephew described Isaac Nettles as a "brilliant recluse" and an inventor in a 1997 newspaper article.⁵ He was born in 1885 on 85 acres near Carlton known as Nettles' Quarters. He apparently studied at Tuskegee Institute but was unable to complete his divinity degree because of a lack of money. He worked for the Mobile Pulley Works during World War I and returned to Carlton to farm after the war. Although a farmer, Nettles continued to build machines and other things. "He basically did anything he put his mind to," nephew James Nettles said" in the newspaper article.⁶ The death mask markers are an example of how he derived creativity out of need. His son said that without money to buy stone for grave markers, Nettles improvised with concrete. Eventually, Nettles left Clarke County and farming to move to Cleveland and later Detroit, where he worked for Ford Motor Co. Family members disagree on whether he died in Carlton or Detroit in 1957, although Nettles' son reported that the sculptor is buried, ironically, in an unmarked grave in Mt. Nebo Cemetery.⁷

Three of the four death mask gravestones are for members of Nettles' family. The largest of the four is a life-size representation of his mother, Selena (d. 1933), from the hips up. The grave of a woman named Angel Ezella Nettles bears a mask of her face. Her name and the nickname "Sis Dollie" appear in raised letters around the image. Nettles' wife, Korean, died in 1933, reportedly as the victim of fever.⁸ Her gravestone bears masks of the Nettles' three daughters, Pauline, Marie, and Clara. Isaac Nettles's artistic creativity may have been affected by the traumatic experience of losing his mother and wife within a very brief period of time.⁹ Their two deaths in 1933 mark the first of Nettles's death mask grave markers in the cemetery. The fourth death mask gravestone is that of Manul Burell, a man who died in September 1946. According to a community resident, Mr. Burell liked the other stones that Nettles had made and requested one for his own

³T.H. Ball, *A Glance Into the Great South-East, Or, Clarke County, Alabama, And Its Surroundings, From 1540 to 1877* (Grove Hill, AL: n.p., 1882; reprint, Clarke County Historical Society, 1973), 628. Page citations to the reprint edition.

⁴*Clarke County Historical Society Quarterly* 4, No. 3, 23.

⁵Casandra Andrews, "Masks of Immortality," *Mobile Register* 26 October 1997.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

⁹McIntyre, personal communication to author, 11 August 1999.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8, 9, 10 Page 4 Name of Property: Nettles, Isaac, Gravestones
County and State: Clarke County, Alabama

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grave.¹⁰

The death mask gravestones of Mt. Nebo Cemetery have been recognized as unique and significant by folklorists in the state. Joey Brackner, a folk life program manager for the Alabama State Council in the Arts, remarked that the stones at Mt. Nebo may be unique in the southeast.¹¹ They were placed on a list of Clarke County's most endangered historic places in 1996.¹² Brackner noted that the fact that Nettles' creations are exact images departs from other forms of sculpture in funerary art. "Even with nineteenth-century marble monuments, rarely do they try to capture the exact image.... This molding and actually making a death mask and casting it in concrete is truly unique."¹³ Another African American artist, Boosie Jackson (1881-1966) of Bullock County, made sculpted cement grave markers, although it is unknown if he ever created exact representations of deceased persons as Nettles did.¹⁴ Unfortunately, the Mt. Nebo death mask gravestones have suffered the ravages of weather on concrete and probably vandalism. The preservation of the stones is a difficult proposition because of their materials and the need to leave them intact in the cemetery.

9. BIBLIOGRAPHY

Andrews, Casandra. "Masks of Immortality," *Mobile Register*, 26 October 1997.

Ball, T.H. *A Glance Into the Great South-East, Or, Clarke County, Alabama, And Its Surroundings, From 1540 to 1877*. Grove Hill, AL: n.p., 1882. Reprint, Clarke County Historical Society, 1973.

Clarke County Historical Society Quarterly.

McIntyre, Patrick. "Isaac Nettles, Visionary Grave Sculptor." Unpublished paper submitted to University of Southern Mississippi's Piney Woods Folklore Project. Files of the Alabama Historical Commission.

_____. Personal communication with author. 11 August 1999. Notes in possession of the Alabama Historical Commission.

Williams, Ed. "Cemetery Art." *EnviroSouth* 9 (Fall 1985): 16-17, 25.

10. GEOGRAPHICAL DESCRIPTION

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

The nominated property is a portion of the northwest quarter of Section 3, Township 4 North, Range 2 East of the Carlton,

¹⁰Ed Williams, "Cemetery Art," *EnviroSouth* 9 (Fall 1985), 17.

¹¹Andrews.

¹²McIntyre, "Isaac Nettles."

¹³Andrews.

¹⁴McIntyre, "Isaac Nettles."

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section 10, photos Page 5 Name of Property: Nettles, Isaac, Gravestones
County and State: Clarke County, Alabama

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Alabama, quadrangle. The boundaries that include the Isaac Nettles Gravestones are a triangular area within the Mt. Nebo Cemetery. The boundaries begin at the northern edge of the Manul Burell gravestone, a point 221' 120 degrees southeast of a fixed point at the southeast corner of Mt. Nebo Church. From this point, the boundary continues in a straight line 77 feet at compass reading 110 degrees southeast to a point even with the midpoint of an oak tree within the cemetery. The boundary continues 38 feet at compass reading 210 degrees south/southwest to an iron post even with the midpoint of the oak tree. From this iron post the boundary returns to the Manul Burell gravestone, a distance of 84 feet, 6 inches at compass reading 310 degrees northwest.

BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION

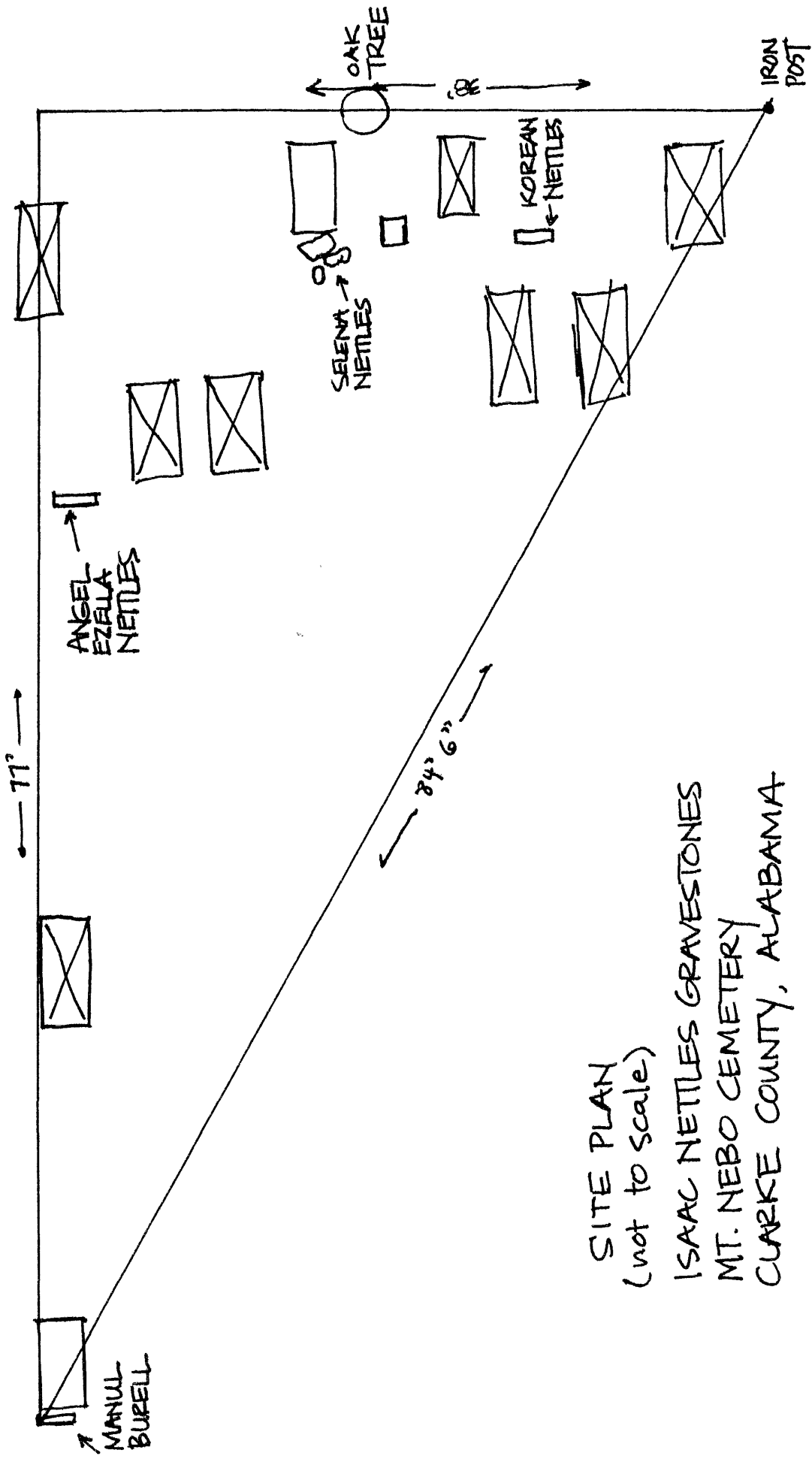
The boundaries include only the area of the cemetery where the Isaac Nettles Gravestones are located.

PHOTOGRAPHS

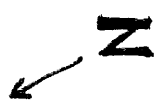
Isaac Nettles Gravestones
Clarke County, Alabama


Photographer: Johnathan Farris
Date: February 3, 1999
Location of negatives: Alabama Historical Commission
468 S. Perry St.
Montgomery, AL 36130-0900

- 1
General view of cemetery, facing west
- 2
Gravestone of Angel Ezella Nettles, facing west
- 3
Gravestone of Selena Nettles, facing east
- 4
Gravestone of Selena Nettles, facing west
- 5
Gravestone of Korean Nettles, facing west
- 6
Gravestone of Korean Nettles, facing north
- 7
Gravestone of Manul Burell, facing west
- 8
gravestone of Manul Burell, facing west



SITE PLAN
 (not to scale)
 ISAAC NETTLES GRAVESTONES
 MT. NEBO CEMETERY
 CLARKE COUNTY, ALABAMA



 = non-contributing slab gravemarkers

ROAD