

# Civil end for war relic



Grave marker, novel's inspiration, returned to Natchez cemetery after 65 years

By **KATHY DES JARDINS CIOFFI**  
Contributing Writer

For author Diana Savastano, truth is no stranger to fiction. In 1991, she bought a Civil War relic purportedly pilfered from Mississippi's Natchez National Cemetery by a young boy decades earlier. She was so inspired by the piece, a memorial star grave marker, that she eventually wrapped a fictional tale, "The Marker," around it.

Then, soon after publishing the novel last September, the Johns Creek resident did something so unusual that it made headlines near and far: She returned the five-pointed star to the cemetery from which it was snatched.

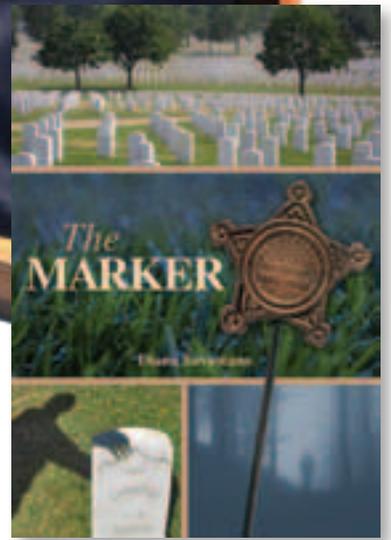
While the storyline in Savastano's romantic, supernatural mystery is the product of her imagination, virtually every detail about the namesake artifact is authentic. Just as her book's heroine did, Savastano bought the grave marker from a Florida antiques dealer, who claimed his son had taken it during a 1952 family trip to Natchez. Inscribed "Our Comrade Soldier, 1861-1865," the star had been hidden for decades because the shopkeeper said he feared retribution. When he put the 3-pound, cast-iron piece in Savastano's hand, however, she felt a connection.

"In my writer's mind, I heard three simple words: write my story," she said. Which she did — after paying \$35 for the keepsake and spending the next 26 years fitting research and writing in between journalism assignments, magazine editing, penning other books and managing a publishing business.

"The Marker" features a current-day newspaperwoman communicating with a Civil War soldier. Pure fiction. It also details numerous steps involved in verifying the piece. All fact.

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**AUTHOR,  
DIANA SAVASTANO**



After the Natchez National Cemetery's director told Savastano that a cemetery employee recalled a marker reported missing in 1952, she worked with officials from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and Atlanta's Civil War Museum to learn more. Memorial star grave markers, she discovered, were post-war mementos commissioned by grieving families to leave at gravesites, often those of unknown soldiers. Once the curios started popping up in antiques stores and on online sales sites, however, most national cemeteries removed any that remained. And none missing had ever been returned — until Savastano's book was finally finished.

"From the beginning, my intention was to return the piece to its rightful place when my novel was completed," she said. And on Dec. 11, 2017, she did just that. In a two-car caravan filled with five generations of family members — from her 97-year-old mother-in-law to her great-granddaughter — Savastano traveled to the Natchez National Cemetery, where she was greeted by VA and cemetery officials assembled for a simple ceremony commemorating a five-pointed star coming full circle.

"I didn't want anything like bombs bursting in air or that kind of thing," she said. "My patriotism was in returning the piece to where it belonged. It should have never been taken off federal land.

"I was really blessed with this piece," she said. "But putting the marker back into that cemetery was a priority with me. It was a sacred piece. It was taken from an unknown soldier's gravesite."

Now, in addition to informing the pages of Savastano's fast-paced, history-packed novel, the 150-year-old grave marker is on display in the Natchez National Cemetery's administrative office, along with a note from the author explaining how she acquired it.

"I was sad to let go of it," said Savastano, who is busy promoting her recently completed children's book, "The Adventures of Marcello Mousetti (The Leaning Mouse of Pisa)," as well as beginning a cozy mystery series. "But I'm happy to know where it is and that others will get to see it and pay honor to the many unknown soldiers of the Civil War." ■

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**Skip Solomon**, left, assistant director of the Natchez National Cemetery, holds the memorial star grave marker returned by author **Diana Savastano**, far right, in December 2017. Five generations of Savastanos traveled from Johns Creek to Mississippi for the ceremony.