IN MY OPINION

Laurel **WALKER**

He led Southern troops for Union

We know little about a Civil War veteran named Jesse O. Barber, but what we do know is that he can now rest in peace.

He was an officer in the Union Army who's been buried under a Confederate soldier's tombstone.

"It'd be like an soldier being buried in a and saying it was a Nazi's," said Bruce Laine, a Civil buff from Eagle who helped set the record straight.

That's as wrong as it gets.

"This gentleman served our country — and he served the Union," Laine said. "He fought against these guys. Confederates were the enemy."

If Barber was rolling in his grave over the mistake made several years ago, he's surely settled down by now. A new — and presumably now correct — tombstone was dedicated June 10 at Little Prairie Cemetery, just south of the Waukesha County line in Walworth County's Town of Troy.

Laine is active in the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War and its continuing effort to record and mark every Civil War veteran's grave.

Curiosity often sends him into cemeteries. While walking in Little Prairie Cemetery a few miles from his home in Eagle, Laine happened upon Barber's Confederate marker.

"Why would there be a Confederate veteran in Wisconsin?" he wondered. "That's kind of rare."

The tombstone identified Barber as a second lieutenant in the 6th Regiment Mississippi Volunteers, from deep in the Confederacy. But Laine's check of rosters produced no sign of Barber — odd, since information on officers was usually more dependable.

Lane dug some more and found a Jesse Barber from Oconto, near Green Bay, who had served with the 12th Wisconsin Infantry out of Madison. He was listed as a sergeant. And sure enough, records said he'd been promoted to second lieutenant in Mississippi's 6th.

The Wisconsin unit was called "The Marching Twelfth" because of the distance it covered on foot. It had marched to Mississippi and beyond.

Most Mississippi units *were* Confederate. But Laine said the 6th was made up of African-Americans — black soldiers who fought in the Civil War for the North, even if from
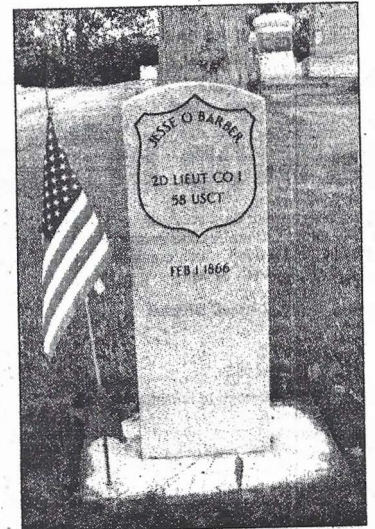
PHOTOS COURTESY DANIELLE LAINE

A replacement tombstone (bottom), dedicated this month, correctly identifies Jesse Barber as a Union officer. The earlier stone (top) said he was a Confederate.

Just because he led Mississippi unit

the South.

In case you need a reminder of how far this country needed to come back then, only whites could be officers of the "colored troops," Laine said.

Barber was white.

To avoid confusion — obviously, there's been plenty of that along the way — the Union renamed the 6th Mississippi Colored Infantry the 58th Regiment, United States Colored Troops.

"I just put two and two together," Laine said. Barber wasn't a Confederate at all.

Art of persuasion

Next he had to persuade the cemetery association and the federal government, which

doesn't mean he was a Confederate

paid for the wrong marker initially and would be the one to replace it.

Richard Baker of Reedsburg, a cemetery association member formerly of the Eagle area, had helped get Barber's old, broken tombstone replaced about four or five years ago. He said the privately furnished stone identified Barber's Mis-

sissippi unit but was silent on the question of Confederate vs. Union.

"Right away, what do you think? Mississippi, that's Confederate, right?" Baker said.

He couldn't find any Mississippi documentation, either, but sent the information he had, including pictures of the old tombstone, on to govern-

ment veterans agencies. The federal government pays to replace missing or damaged — or erroneous — veterans' markers.

"They issued a Confederate stone," Baker said. "Everything was fine."

Several years later, along came Laine and his curiosity.

New stone issued

A new stone was issued at federal government expense, and donated labor got it installed this spring.

Now the only mystery that remains is who Barber was outside the military and how he came to rest in the Walworth County countryside.

"We don't know anything about him," Laine said. Not even his age.

Lane said Barber was still in the military when he died of disease after the war, on Feb. 1, 1866. His body was shipped back to Wisconsin.

There, at Little Prairie Cemetery, Jesse O. Barber rests in peace — at last.