

COWPENS



Tarleton and William Washington spar briefly at the end of the battle, just before the British commander fled from the field. From the painting by William Ranney, 1845.

NATIONAL BATTLEFIELD
SOUTH CAROLINA

COWPENS

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scene of the brilliant
victory of Gen. Daniel Morgan's
American Army over a
superior British force,
January 17, 1781

The victory of American arms at Cowpens in 1781 over a corps of British Regulars was the second victory enjoyed by the patriot forces within three months. Depressed by two years of defeat and persecution, patriot hopes had been raised by the victory at Kings Mountain the previous October. Cowpens transformed that hope into courageous action. After Cowpens, wavering sympathizers became more positive, fear-bound Whigs, more outspoken, and ardent patriots, more active in their support of the American cause.

IN late 1778, after failing to quell the rebellion in the North, the British decided to shift their theater of operations into the Southern provinces, where they soon enjoyed successes.

Savannah was captured at the end of December 1778, and soon all of Georgia was subjugated. When the British Army and Navy besieged Charleston in April and May 1780, that city and its defending army surrendered after futile resistance, opening South Carolina to invasion. At Camden in August of that same year a British Army commanded by Lord Cornwallis disastrously defeated the hurriedly formed American Army under Gen. Horatio Gates. South Carolina now fell under complete military control, and Cornwallis moved on into North Carolina, establishing his headquarters at Charlotte.

Then on October 7, 1780, the British were set back for the first time. At Kings Mountain American riflemen completely destroyed a Tory force under Maj. Patrick Ferguson. Cornwallis, 30 miles away, suddenly felt exposed and pulled back to Winnsboro, S.C., where he set up his headquarters. There he got word that the new commander of the American Army in the South, Gen. Nathanael Greene, had divided his army, sending part into the northwestern section of South Carolina. This was the detachment led by Gen. Daniel Morgan. The British outposts in the area were now threatened.

To meet this threat, Cornwallis detached Lt. Col. Banastre Tarleton with infantry and cavalry and sent him to overtake Morgan. Cornwallis himself moved northward from Winnsboro to get between Greene and Morgan.

When Morgan reached the northwest corner of South Carolina, his scouts informed him that the British were no more than a day's march away and moving fast.

Upon learning that the British force was approaching, Morgan moved still farther northward toward the Broad River. Stopping 8 miles short, he decided to make his stand at a place near the North Carolina border called the Cowpens because of a nearby winter cattle enclosure. Here, on January 16, 1781, Morgan awaited Tarleton's attack.

EARLY the following morning, Morgan placed his 970 men in battle formation. The position he selected lay on both sides of the old Mill Gap Road (S.C. 11) in an open woods. Two gentle ridges rose from the Cowpens, separated by a swale about 80 yards in extent. The rain-swollen Broad River in the rear cut off all retreat, and there were no swamps or thickets to protect the American flanks. From the main ridge the terrain sloped slightly toward the south, the direction from which Tarleton was advancing.

Morgan drew up his forces in three lines. In the frontline he placed Maj. Joseph McDowell and Maj. William Cunningham with a group of riflemen selected from Col. Andrew Pickens' command. In the second line, 150 yards behind, he placed the remaining South Carolina, North Carolina, and Georgia militia led by Pickens. And another 150 yards behind Pickens' militia, near the intersection of S.C. 11 and 110, he stationed his main line of Maryland and Delaware Continentals and Virginia militia, commanded by Col. John Eager Howard. For the reserve he ordered Lt. Col. William Washington's cavalry and 45 mounted militiamen under Maj. James McCall to stand by, out of sight, behind the low ridge to the rear.

Morgan's militia, for the most part recent recruits, were the least dependable of his troops. Almost certain that they would run when confronted by Tarleton's dragoons, Morgan exhorted them to fire at least two shots at a killing distance before falling back.

At 8 a.m. Tarleton marched his forces into view, deploying his approximately 1,050 men in one line within 300 yards of the American riflemen. Fifty dragoons anchored each end, and a battalion of infantry and 200 cavalry, stationed in the rear, formed his reserve. In the center he posted his artillerymen with two small cannon.

On Tarleton's command the British moved forward. At 50 yards the American skirmish line opened with a brisk fire. Then, according to plan, they fell back into

Pickens' militia, which took over and poured a telling fire into the ranks of the oncoming British. But they too were forced to retreat as the enemy came at them with fixed bayonets. Though some of the militia made for their horses in the rear, Morgan, assisted by Pickens, managed to reassemble them behind Howard's line. For a span the British could make no progress against the main line of the battle-seasoned Continentals.

At this point a rapid succession of events brought the 50-minute battle to an end. Knowing that to win he must now commit his reserves, Tarleton sent them forward to envelop Howard's flank. To meet the threat Howard ordered his right-flank companies to wheel about and engage the flanking regiment.

But these instructions resulted in some confusion, and the militia began retreating. The other officers along Howard's line, seeing the flank companies in retreat and thinking a disengagement had been ordered, faced their men about and began retreating also.

Daniel Morgan saved the day. While busily re-forming the militia behind a ridge, he was surprised to see the entire line of Howard's veterans in what appeared to be full retreat. Assured by Howard that the men were not beaten, Morgan made the best of unforeseen developments. He rode ahead of Howard's men and chose a location for them to turn and fire at the pursuing British. As Tarleton's infantry and cavalry surged forward in disorder to take the victory, the Americans faced about and opened a destructive fire into the onrushing British, only about 30 yards distant. Howard immediately called for a bayonet charge into the now staggering red and green line.

Then as Washington's cavalry fell on Tarleton's right, Morgan threw the re-formed militia at his left. The result was a double envelopment at the most strategic moment. Tarleton was momentarily able to rally 40 horsemen and a handful of officers, but Washington's cavalry moved in and broke up this attempt to reorganize. With the American cavalry in hot pursuit, Tarleton fled the field.

Only about 200 cavalymen escaped Morgan to rejoin Tarleton the next day. The battle cost the British commander 110 men killed, 200 wounded, and over 550 captured. Morgan lost 12 men killed and about 60 wounded. The American victory at Cowpens was the second link in a chain of British defeats that led to their final surrender at Yorktown.

ABOUT YOUR VISIT

Cowpens National Battlefield is located 11 miles northwest of I-85 and Gaffney, S.C., and 2 miles southeast of U.S. 221 and Chesnee, S.C. The battlefield is at the intersection of S.C. 11 and 110.

A major expansion and development of the battlefield is now underway. About 845 acres of land will be acquired, modern roads and buildings will be removed, and the scene will be restored to its appearance in 1781. Both S.C. 11 and 110 will be relocated away from the heart of the battlefield.

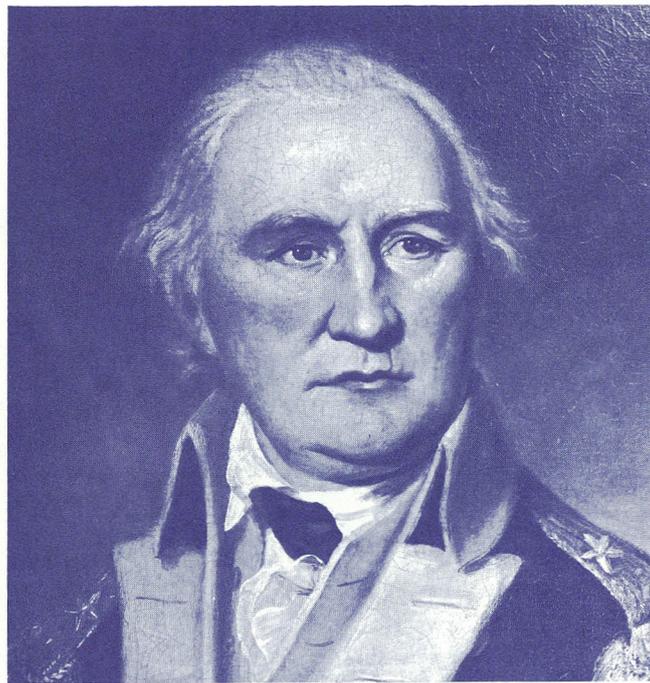
A visitor center, walking trails, a motor tour road, and way-side exhibits are planned. While this work is being completed, the battlefield will offer only temporary visitor facilities.

ADMINISTRATION

Cowpens National Battlefield is administered by the National Park Service. The battlefield is under the supervision of the Superintendent, Kings Mountain National Military Park, whose address is P.O. Box 31, Kings Mountain, NC 28086.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.

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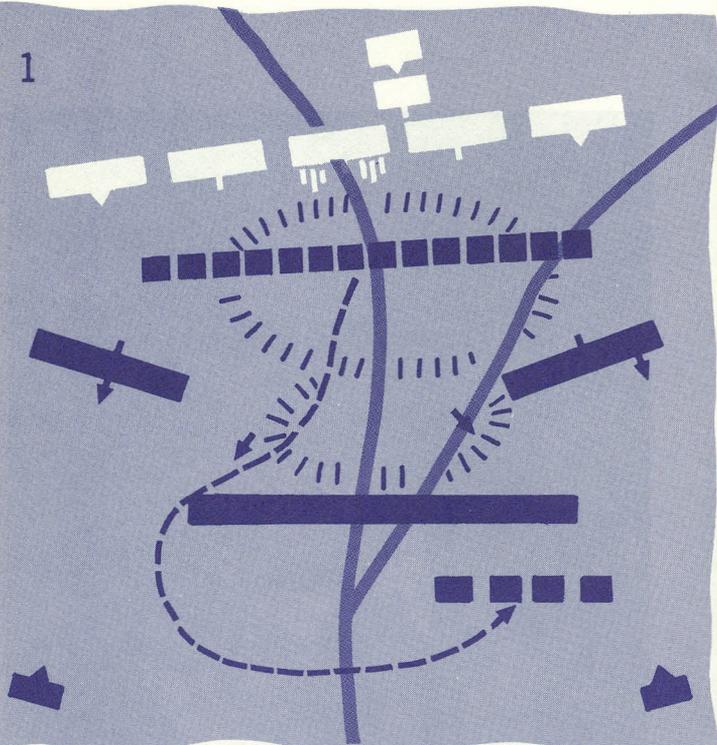


Gen. Daniel Morgan, by Charles Willson Peale.

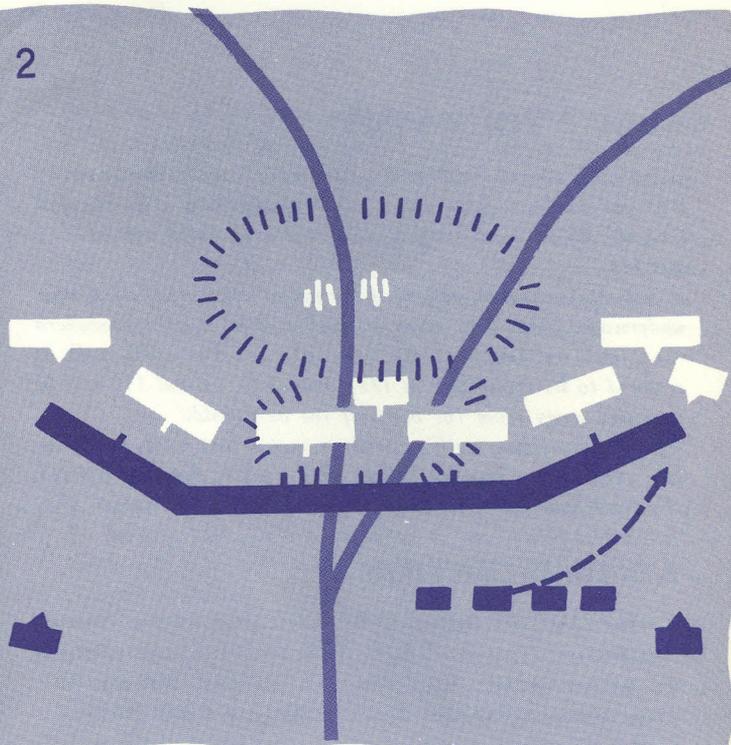


Lt. Col. Banastre Tarleton, a detail from a painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds.

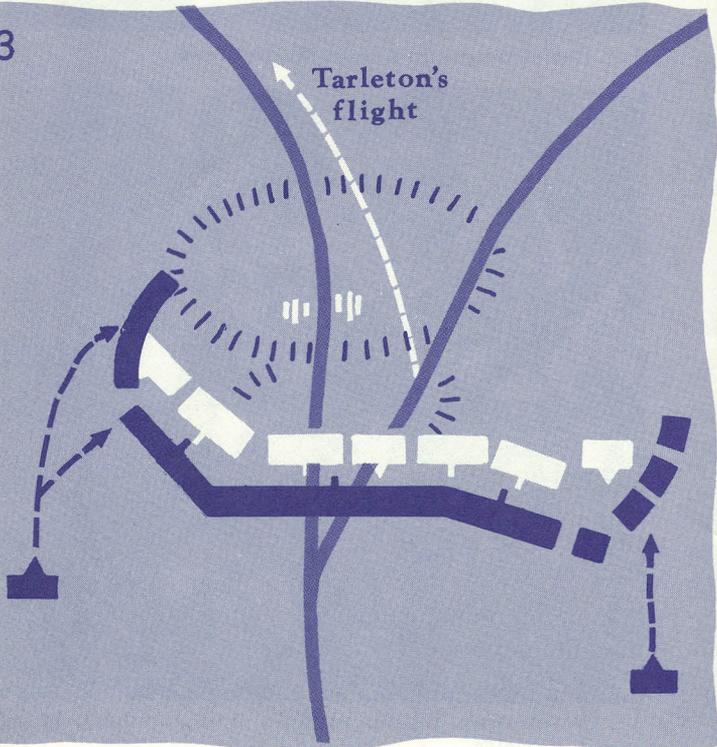
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BATTLE OF COWPENS

January 17, 1781

American



Infantry



Cavalry



Skirmishers

3 lb Cannon

British



Infantry



Cavalry



3 lb Cannon

JULY 1965 NB-COW-17000

MORGAN'S TACTICS at Cowpens were as masterful as any the Revolutionary War produced. Forced by Tarleton's hard pursuit to fight on ground that offered none of the usual defenses, Morgan made a virtue of necessity by adapting his troops to the terrain. Of his choice of battlefields, Morgan later wrote, "When men are forced to fight, they will sell their lives dearly. . . . Had I crossed the river, one half of the militia would immediately have abandoned me."

Morgan had his militia gauged perfectly. Though they were reputed to be brave men and fine shots, he knew that they could not match Tarleton's regulars on an open field. So he devised a plan that would not require them to engage the British in formal combat (Fig. 1). The frontline of skirmishers were to fire two shots, attempting to pick off the British officers, then fall back into Pickens' line. The second line, when joined by the first, was to fire briefly until pressed, then retire in order around Howard's left flank to form the reserve. Howard's Continentals were to stand fast and bear the brunt of the attack.

The plan was successful. After several volleys the militia withdrew to safety behind the ridge held by Howard (Fig. 2), and Washington's cavalry broke up the pursuit of Tarleton's dragoons. As the British pressed into Howard's ranks, the militia, now re-formed, circled the field and crashed into Tarleton's left flank, while Washington's horsemen attacked his right (Fig. 3).



This view of the American rifleman was published in London in 1783.