

On this field on January 17, 1781, Daniel Morgan led his army of tough Continentals and backwoods militia to a brilliant victory over Banastre Tarleton's larger force of British regulars

Morgan and his men were fleeing for their lives when they marched onto this field on the afternoon of January 16. That morning, as the army was cooking breakfast in camp on Thicketty Creek, scouts rode in with news that Tarleton had crossed the Pacolet River, 6 miles south, and was coming up fast. Morgan broke camp immediately and ordered the army down the road. Their destination: the Cowpens, a frontier pasturing ground on the road to a ford over the Broad River. Morgan was in a precarious position. If he crossed the river, most of his militia would



Daniel Morgan, one of the best field tacticians of the Revolution, won permanent fame for his generalship at Cowpens.

probably desert him. If Tarleton overtook the army on the road or caught it astride the river, they could all be cut down. To survive, Morgan had to fight, and the place to do it was at the Cowpens, where the terrain offered him some advantages. His troops welcomed the decision to stand. They were tired of running. They needed rest and a meal. That night Morgan went among the troops cheering them up, explaining what he expected of them, assuring the militia that his cavalry would protect them from Tarleton's saber-swinging dragoons, telling everyone that the "old waggoner" was going to crack his whip over Benny in the morning. An hour before dawn, word came in that Tarleton was only a few miles away.

The two adversaries were an odd contrast. Morgan was a frontiersman, a teamster by trade, known for his brawling, experienced at fighting Indians, and something of a genius at leading men in battle. Tarleton was an offspring of British gentry, schooled at Oxford, and at 21 an officer of dragoons. He volunteered for service in America and cam-

paigned with some distinction in the north. At 24 he found himself commander of the British Legion, a mobile striking force of dragoons and mounted infantry. Coming south with his mentor Cornwallis in early 1780, he took part in the siege and capture of Charleston in the spring and the heady British victory at Camden in August, and recently he had battled the elusive partisans of Thomas Sumter and Francis Marion. Now he was riding at the head of a detachment of 1100 cavalry and infantry, mostly veterans, and his object was to run Morgan down or at least hound him across the Broad River into the hands of the main British army.

Cornwallis, the aggressive commander of that army, had every reason to be confident of the chase. He had dispatched Tarleton with the Legion and some of his best light troops in response to a bold move by Nathanael Greene, successor to the hapless Horatio Gates as commander of the American army in the South. When Greene in desperation divided his tattered army in December 1780 and sent Morgan to operate in western Carolina, he snatched the strategic initiative from Cornwallis and caused him to defer his real objective—the elimination of Greene's army—until he had removed the threat posed by Morgan ranging free in the backcountry.



Banastre Tarleton fought well in small cavalry actions, but was outmatched in the set-piece battle of Cowpens.

Tarleton started after Morgan in early January. Rain and faulty intelligence slowed his march, but by the 14th he was across the Enoree and Tyger Rivers and pressing hard on Morgan's track. Eluding American pickets, he crossed the Pacolet late the next day, putting him within a few hours of Morgan's camp on Thicketty Creek. The next

morning, the 16th, the British marched into the empty camp and helped themselves to the breakfast rations hurriedly left behind. The flight of the enemy stirred the raider in



John Eager Howard of Maryland was as good a field officer as the Revolution produced. His Continentals were the heart of Morgan's army.

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Tarleton. When he discovered Morgan's line of march and heard, moreover, that a "corps of mountaineers" was approaching, he resolved to hang on the rear of the American column and strike at the first chance. At 3 o'clock on the morning of January 17, he ordered his men down the road that Morgan had taken a day earlier.

The place where Morgan chose to give battle was an open woods known locally as Hannah's Cowpens. The ground sloped gently toward the south, the direction from which Tarleton would approach. At the far end were two low crests, separated by a wide swale.

Morgan knew his opponent, and he deployed his troops in a way that made the most of their abilities in the kind of fighting he expected Tarleton to bring on. He had a little over 900 men, but a third were untested militia likely to break before cavalry or bayonet-wielding infantry. He needed their firepower, but dared not place them in a formal line of battle, as Gates did at Camden, and expect them to stand that ground. That was work for regulars. So he devised a plan of battle exactly matched to his men and the terrain.

He formed his troops in three lines straddling the dirt road that curved through the Cowpens. In the front line he placed 120 sharpshooters. Their job: slow the enemy's advance with well-aimed fire, then fall back. A hundred yards behind the skirmishers he

continued on other side

American and British cavalry clash in the opening moments of the battle. A painting by Frederick Kimmelmeyer, 1809.

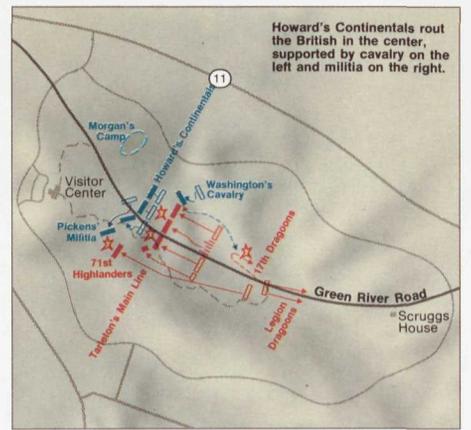
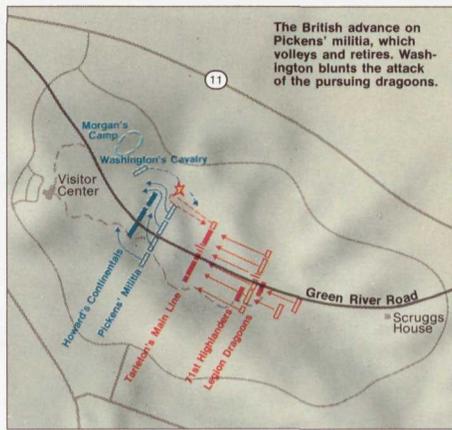
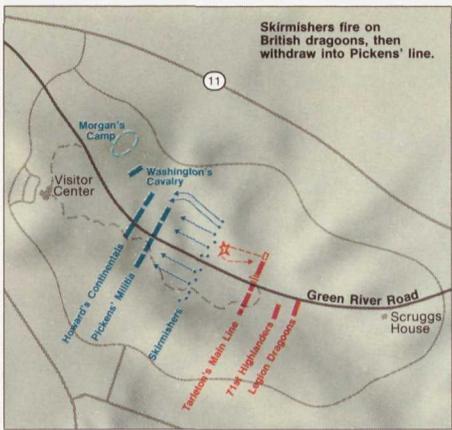


About Your Visit
Cowpens National Battlefield is 11 miles northwest of I-85 and Gaffney, S.C., and 2 miles southeast of U.S. 221 and Chesnee, S.C. The entrance is northwest of the intersection of S.C. 11 and 110.

Among new interpretive facilities at the park are a visitor center with exhibits, a tour road, and a walking trail with way-side exhibits through the heart of the battlefield.

Administration
Cowpens National Battlefield is administered by the National Park Service, United States Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is P.O.

Box 308, Chesnee, South Carolina 29323, is in immediate charge.



put the Carolina and Georgia militia, under Andrew Pickens. Morgan asked them for two volleys at a killing distance and then they were free to file off the field. About 150 yards behind Pickens, stretching along the forward crest, were his crack Continentals from Maryland and Delaware and veteran Virginia militia, about 500 men commanded by John Eager Howard. To these men, who would bear the brunt of the fighting, Morgan spoke earnestly: don't be alarmed at the retreat of the militia, that's part of the plan—fire low and deliberately—don't break—if forced back, rally on the main crest. In the rear, behind that crest, he stationed the cavalry, 120 men under William Washington, with orders to protect the militia and be ready to ride into the fight.

Just before dawn the British stumbled onto the American position. Wanting a better look at the enemy's lines, Tarleton sent cavalry forward to drive in the skirmishers—and lost 15 men to sharp rifle fire.

Without any pause, Tarleton formed his line of battle: the infantry astride the road; on each flank, 50 dragoons; in reserve, a brigade of Highlanders and 200 cavalry. It was still dark when Tarleton started his men toward the American line 400 yards away. As the British came within range, the militia delivered a deadly fire, dropping many officers, and broke for the flanks. The dragoons on the British right pursued them a short way until a fierce charge by Washington's cavalry drove them off, allowing Pickens to re-form his scattered ranks.

The British now surged on to the third line, and the fighting became pitched. When the advance faltered, Tarleton ordered up the Highlanders, who soon threatened to outflank the American right. At this point began a confused tangle of events that soon brought the fighting to a dramatic conclusion. When Howard ordered his right to fall back and present a new front, the order was mistaken and the whole line began to retreat.

Seeing this maneuver, Morgan rode up and chose new ground for the Continentals to rally on. Reaching that point, they faced about and fired point-blank at the closing redcoats, then plunged into the staggered ranks with bayonets. As this was happening, Washington's cavalry rode again into the swirling fight, while on the British left, Pickens' militia opened a galling fire on the dragoons and Highlanders. British resistance quickly collapsed. A few dragoons rallied to Tarleton, but they could do nothing effective and followed the Legion cavalry, which never got into the fight, in a pell-mell dash off the field.

It was all over in an hour. The British losses were staggering: 110 dead, over 200 wounded and 500 captured. Morgan lost only 12 killed and 60 wounded in a victory as complete as any in the war. Cowpens was another link in a chain of British disasters in the South that led ultimately to final defeat at Yorktown.

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