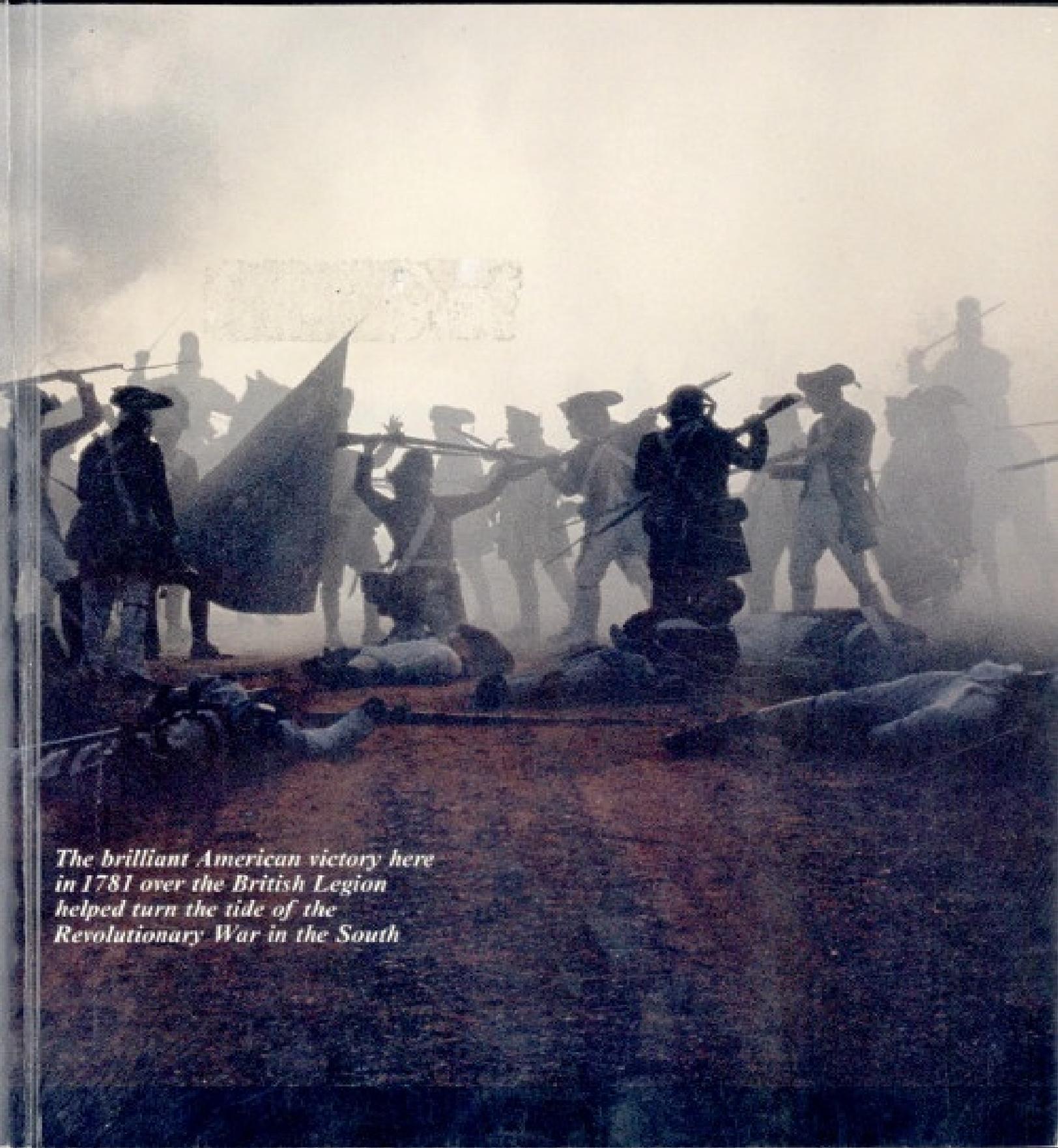


Cowpens

Official National Park Handbook



*The brilliant American victory here
in 1781 over the British Legion
helped turn the tide of the
Revolutionary War in the South*

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Handbook 135 Cowpens

“Downright Fighting” The Story of Cowpens

by Thomas J. Fleming

A Handbook for
Cowpens National Battlefield
South Carolina

Produced by the
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National Park Service

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Washington, D.C. 1988

About this book

The story of Cowpens, as told in these pages, is ever fresh and will live in memory as long as America's wars are studied and talked about. The author is Thomas Fleming, a biographer, military historian, and novelist of distinction. His works range from an account of the Pilgrims' first year in America to biographies of Jefferson and Franklin and novels of three American wars. *Downright Fighting, The Story of Cowpens* is a gripping tale by a master storyteller of what has been described as the patriot's best fought battle of the Revolutionary War.

The National Park System, of which Cowpens National Battlefield is a unit, consists of more than 340 parks totaling 80 million acres. These parks represent important examples of the nation's natural and cultural inheritance.

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Prologue



On the morning of January 15, 1781, Morgan's army looked down this road at Tarleton's legion deploying into a line of battle. Locally it was known as the Green River Road. Four or five miles beyond the position held by Morgan, the road crossed the Broad River at Island Ford. For opposite reasons, Morgan and Tarleton each thought this field and its relationship to the Broad River gave him the advantage.

Splendid Antagonists

As battlefields go, this one is fairly plain: a grassy clearing in a scrub-pine forest with no obvious military advantages. There are a thousand meadows like it in upstate South Carolina. This one is important because two centuries ago armies clashed here in one of the dramatic battles of the Revolutionary War.

In January 1781, this clearing was a frontier pasturing ground, known locally as the Cowpens. The name came from the custom of upcountry stock raisers wintering their cattle in the lush vales around Thicketty Mountain. It was probably squatters' ground, though one tradition says that it belonged to a person named Hannah, while another credits it to one Hiram Saunders, a wealthy loyalist who lived close by.

The meadow was apparently well known to frontiersmen. The previous October, a body of over-mountain men, pursuing Patrick Ferguson and his loyalist corps, made camp here and, according to another tradition, hauled the Tory Saunders out of bed at night seeking information on Ferguson's whereabouts. Finding no sign of an army passing through, they butchered some cattle and after refreshing themselves took up the trail again.

When the troops of Continental General Daniel Morgan filed onto this field on a dank January day in 1781, they were an army on the run, fleeing an implacable and awesome enemy, the dreaded British Legion of Col. Banastre Tarleton. Their patrols reported that they were substantially outnumbered, and by any military measure of the time, they were clearly outclassed. They were a mixed force of some 830 soldiers—320 seasoned Continentals, a troop of light dragoons, and the rest militia. Though some of the militia were former Continentals, known to be stalwarts in battle, most were short-term soldiers whose unpredictable performance might give a commander pause when battle lines were drawn. Their foe, Tarleton's Legion, was the best light corps in the British army in America, and it was now reinforced by several hundred British regulars and an artillery company.

On this afternoon of January 16, 1781, the men of Morgan's army had run long enough. They were spoiling for a fight. They knew Tarleton as the enemy whose troopers at the Waxhaws had sabered to death Americans in the act of

surrendering. From him they had taken their own merciless victory cry, “Tarleton’s quarter.” In the months after the infamous butchery, as Tarleton’s green-jacketed dragoons attacked citizens and soldiers alike and pillaged farms and burned homes, they had come to characterize him as “Bloody Tarleton.” He was bold, fearless, often rash and always a savage enemy, and they seethed to have a go at him.

Morgan chose this ground as much for its tactical advantages as from necessity. Most of his militia lacked bayonets and could not stand up to bayonet-wielding redcoats in a line of battle. Morgan saw advantage in this unlikely field: a river to the rear to discourage the ranks from breaking, rising ground on which to post his regulars, a scattering of trees to hinder the enemy’s cavalry, and marsh on one side to thwart flanking maneuvers. It was ground on which he could deploy his troops to make the most of their abilities in the kind of fighting that he expected Tarleton to bring on.

In the narrative that follows, Thomas Fleming, a historian with the skills of a novelist, tells the authentic, dramatic story that climaxed on the next morning. In his fully fleshed chronicle, intimate in detail and rich in insights, he relates the complex events that took shape in the Southern colonies after the War of the Revolution stalemated in the north. He describes the British strategy for conquering the rebel Americans and the Americans’ counterstrategy. An important part of this story is an account of the daringly unorthodox campaign of commander-in-chief George Washington’s trusted lieutenant Nathanael Greene, who finally “flushed the bird” that Washington caught at Yorktown. Upon reading *Downright Fighting*, one understands why the Homeric battle between two splendid antagonists on the morning of January 17, 1781, became the beginning of the end of the British hold on America.

—George F. Scheer



Scattered hardwoods gave Morgan’s skirmishers protection and helped deflect Tarleton’s hard-riding dragoons sent out to drive them in. The battle opened at sunrise, in light similar to this scene.

Part 1

“Downright Fighting”

The Story of Cowpens.

by Thomas J. Fleming



British and Continental dragoons clash in the opening minutes of battle. From Frederick Kimmelmeyer’s painting, “The Battle of Cowpens,” 1809.

The Anatomy of Victory

1

All night the two men rode northwest along the muddy winding roads of South Carolina's back country. Twice they had to endure bone-chilling swims across swollen creeks. Now, in the raw gray cold of dawn, they faced a more formidable obstacle—the wide, swift Pacolet River. They rode along it until they found the ford known as Grindal Shoals. Ordinarily, it would have been easy to cross. But the river was high. The icy water lapped at their thighs as the weary horses struggled to keep their feet in the rushing current. “Halt,” snarled a voice from the river bank. “Who goes there?”

“Friend,” said the lead rider, 25-year-old Joseph McJunkin.

The sentry barked the password for the night. McJunkin and his companion, James Park, did not know the countersign. McJunkin told the sentry he had an important message for General Morgan. The sentry told him not to move or he would put a hole through his chest. He called for the captain of the guard. The two riders had to sit there in the icy river while the captain made his way to the bank. Once more McJunkin insisted he had a message for General Morgan. It was from Colonel Pickens. It was very important.

The captain invited the two men onto the north bank of the Pacolet. Above them, on a wooded hill, was the camp of Brig. Gen. Daniel Morgan of the Continental Army of the United States. Around Morgan's tent, about 830 men were lighting fires and beginning to cook their breakfasts, which consisted largely of cornmeal. From a barrel in a wagon, a commissary issued a gill (four ounces) of rum. Most added water to it and put it in their canteens. A few gulped the fiery liquid straight, in spite of the frowns of their officers. Some 320 of the men still wore pieces of uniforms—a tattered blue coat here, a ragged white wool waistcoat there, patched buff breeches. In spite of the rainy, cold January weather, few had shoes on their feet. These men were Continentals—the names by which patriot regular army soldiers, usually enlisted for three years, were known.

The rest of the army wore a varied assortment of civilian clothing. Hunting shirts

of coarse homespun material known as linsey-woolsey, tightly belted, or loose wool coats, also homespun, leather leggings, wool breeches. These men were militia—summoned from their homes to serve as emergency soldiers for short periods of time. Most were from western districts of the Carolinas. About 120 were riflemen from Virginia, committed to serving for six months. Most of these were former Continentals. They were being paid by other Virginians who hired them as substitutes to avoid being drafted into the army. After five years of war, patriotism was far from universal in America.

In his tent, Morgan listened to the message McJunkin brought from Col. Andrew Pickens: the British were advancing in force. Morgan whirled and roused from a nearby camp cot a small groggy man who had managed to sleep through McJunkin's bad news. His name was Baron de Glaubech. He was one of the many French volunteers who were serving with the Americans. "Baron," Morgan said. "Get up. Go back and tell Billy that Benny is coming and he must meet me tomorrow evening at Gentleman Thompson's on the east side of Thicketty Creek."

Sixty-three years later, when he was 80, Joseph McJunkin remembered these words with their remarkable combination of informality and decision. It was part of the reason men like young McJunkin trusted Daniel Morgan. It was somehow reassuring to hear him call Lt. Col. William Washington, commander of the American cavalry and second cousin to Gen. George Washington, "Billy." It was even more reassuring to hear him call Lt. Col. Banastre Tarleton, commander of the British army that was coming after them, "Benny."

Adding to this reassurance was 45-year-old Daniel Morgan's appearance and reputation. He was over six feet tall, with massive shoulders and arms, toughened from his youthful years as a wagonmaster in western Virginia. In his younger days he had been one of the champion sluggers and wrestlers of the Shenandoah Valley. His wide volatile face could still flash from cheerfulness to pugnacity in an instant. In the five years of the Revolution, Morgan had become a living legend: the man who led a reckless assault into the very mouths of British cannon on the barricaded streets of Quebec in 1775, whose corps of some 570 riflemen had been the cutting edge of the American army that defeated the British at Saratoga in 1777.



The victor at Saratoga, Gen. Horatio Gates (top) came south in July 1780 to

command the Southern Department after the main Continental army in the South was surrendered at Charleston. Charles Willson Peale shows Gates at 49 with an open face and a steady gaze.



A month later he himself was routed at Camden by Cornwallis. Cornwallis was only 45, two years after Yorktown, when he sat for Gainsborough. Both generals are portrayed in their prime.

Daniel Morgan, Frontiersman



He was a giant of a man, 6 feet 2 inches, with a full face, blue eyes, dark hair, and a classic nose. As a youth in western Virginia, he had drifted into wagoneering along the roads of the frontier. His education was slight. Good-natured and gregarious, he was, like his companions of the road, rowdy and given to drink, gambling, and fighting. In time, he married, settled down, went into farming, and became a man of substance in his community.

He was already a hero of the Revolution when he took command of Greene's light troops in late 1780. His rifle corps had fought with distinction at Quebec (1775) and Saratoga (1777). But after being passed over for promotion, unfairly he thought, he retired to his Virginia farm. When the South fell to British armies in 1780, he put aside his feelings and welcomed a new command.

Morgan was at home in the slashing, partisan warfare in the South. At Cowpens the mixed force of regulars and militia that he led so ably destroyed Tarleton's dreaded Legion, depriving Cornwallis of a wing of swift-moving light troops essential to his army's operation.



Woodcuts of the gold medal Congress awarded Morgan for his victory at Cowpens. The original medal is lost.



Morgan's fine stone house, which he named "Saratoga," still stands near Winchester, Virginia.

The War in the South



NORTH CAROLINA

New Bern•

Edenton•

Brunswick•

Gilbert Town•

SOUTH CAROLINA

Georgetown•

GEORGIA

Augusta•

Moore's Creek 27 Feb 1776

Sullivan's Island 28 June 1776

Kettle Creek 14 Feb 1779

Brier Creek 3 March 1779

Lenud's Ferry 6 May 1780

Waxhaws 29 May 1780

Williamson Plantation 12 July 1780

Kings Mountain 7 Oct 1780

Ninety Six•

Besieged by Greene May-June 1781;

evacuated by the British July 1781

Hobkirk's Hill 25 Apr 1781

Charleston•

Captured by the British 12 May 1780

Eutaw Springs 8 Sept 1781

Fort Watson

HIGH HILLS OF SANTEE

Cornwallis routs Gates at Camden and advances into North Carolina

Camden•

Hanging Rock 6 Aug 1780

Camden 16 Aug 1780

Fishing Creek 18 Aug 1780

Great Savannah 20 Aug 1780

Charlotte•

Greene divides his army sending Morgan to the west and the main army into winter quarters at Cheraw Hills. 20-26 Dec 1780

Cheraw Hills•

Greene's winter quarters 1780-1781

Grindal Shoals

Morgan's camp 25 Dec 1780 to 14 Jan 1781

Cornwallis turns back after Ferguson's defeat at Kings Mountain and goes into winter quarters at Winnsborough.

Winnsborough•

Cornwallis's winter quarters 1780-1781

Tarleton

Musgroves Mill 18 Aug 1780

Fishdam Ford 9 Nov 1780

Blackstocks 20 Nov 1780

Hammonds Store 28 Dec 1780

Easterwood Shoals

Cowpens 17 Jan 1781

Hamiltons Ford

Cornwallis pursues Morgan.

Morgan's line of retreat after Cowpens.

Green River Road

Island Ford

Beatties Ford

Island Ford

Ramsour's Mill

Cornwallis burns his baggage. 24 Jan 1781

Salisbury•

Salem•

Guilford Courthouse•

Cheraw Hills•

Coxs Mill

Greene races for the Dan River with Cornwallis in pursuit.

Boyds Ferry

Greene crosses the Dan River and is resupplied and reinforced. 13 Feb 1781

Cornwallis halts south of the Dan River.

Hillsborough•

Guilford Courthouse 15 March 1781

Ramseys Mill•

Greene breaks off pursuit of Cornwallis after Guilford.

Cross Creek•

Elizabethtown•

Cornwallis retreats to Wilmington

Wilmington•

Cornwallis marches into Virginia April-May 1781

Halifax•

Petersburg•

Richmond•

Williamsburg•

Yorktown•

Cornwallis surrenders 19 Oct 1781

The lower South became the decisive theatre of the Revolutionary War. After the struggle settled into stalemate in the north, the British mounted their second campaign to conquer the region. British expeditionary forces captured Savannah in late 1778 and Charleston in May 1780. By late in that summer, most of South Carolina was pacified, and a powerful British army under Cornwallis was poised to sweep across the Carolinas into Virginia.

This map traces the marches of Cornwallis (red) and his wily adversary Nathanael Greene (blue). The campaign opened at Charleston in August 1780 when Cornwallis marched north to confront Gen. Horatio Gates moving south with a Continental army. It ended at Yorktown in October 1781 with Cornwallis's surrender of the main British army in America. In between were 18 months of some of the hardest campaigning and most savage fighting of the war.

On this 14th of January, 1781, a great many people in South Carolina and North Carolina were badly in need of the reassurance that Daniel Morgan communicated. The year just completed had been a series of military and political disasters, with only a few flickering glimpses of hope for the Americans who had rebelled against George III and his Parliament in 1776. In 1780 the British had adopted a new strategy. Leaving enough troops to pin down George Washington's main American army near New York, the British had sent another army south to besiege Charleston. On May 12, 1780, the city and its defending army, under the command of a Massachusetts general named Benjamin Lincoln, surrendered. Two hundred and forty-five regular officers and 2,326 enlisted men became captives along with an equal number of South Carolina militia.

became captives along with an equal number of South Carolina militia, thousands of muskets, dozens of cannon, and tons of irreplaceable gunpowder and other supplies were also lost.



Gen. Nathanael Greene (1742-86) served with distinction in two roles: as quartermaster general of the army after others had failed in the post, and as the strategist of the decisive Southern Campaign.

It was the worst American defeat of the war. The Continental Congress responded by sending south Gen. Horatio Gates, commander of the army that had beaten the British at Saratoga. Gates brought with him about 1,200 Maryland and Delaware Continentals and called on the militia of North Carolina and Virginia to support him. On August 16, 1780, outside the village of Camden, S.C., the Americans encountered an army commanded by Charles, Earl Cornwallis, the most aggressive British general in America. Cornwallis ordered a bayonet charge. The poorly armed, inexperienced militia panicked and fled. The Continentals fought desperately for a time but were soon surrounded and overwhelmed.

Both North and South Carolina now seemed prostrate. There was no patriot army in either state strong enough to resist the thousands of British regulars. Georgia had been conquered by a combined British naval and land force in late 1778 and early 1779. There were rumors that America's allies, France and Spain, were tired of the war and ready to call a peace conference. Many persons thought that the Carolinas and Georgia would be abandoned at this conference. In the Continental Congress, some already considered them lost. "It is agreed on all hands the whole state of So. Carolina hath submitted to the British Government as well as Georgia," a Rhode Island delegate wrote. "I shall not be surprised to hear N. Carolina hath followed their example."



Thomas Sumter (1732-1832), a daring and energetic partisan leader, joined the patriot side after Tarleton's dragoons burned his Santee home. His militia harassed and sometimes defeated the British in the savage civil war that gripped the South Carolina backcountry in 1780-81.

British spokesmen eagerly promoted this idea. They were more numerous in the Carolinas than most 20th-century Americans realize. The majority of them were

American born—men and women whom the rebel Americans called Tories and today are usually known as loyalists. Part of the reason for this defection was geographical. The people of the back country had long feuded with the wealthier lowlanders, who controlled the politics of the two States. The lowlanders had led the Carolinas into the war with the mother country, and many back-country people sided with the British in the hope of humbling the haughty planters. Some of these counter-revolutionists sincerely believed their rights would be better protected under the king. Another large group thought the British were going to win the war and sided with them in the hope of getting rich on the rebels' confiscated estates. A third, more passive group simply lacked the courage to oppose their aggressive loyalist neighbors.

The British set up forts, garrisoned by regulars and loyalists, in various districts of South Carolina and told the people if they swore an oath of allegiance to the king and promised to lay down their weapons, they would be protected and forgiven for any and all previous acts of rebellion. Thousands of men accepted this offer and dropped out of the war.

But some South Carolinians refused to submit to royal authority. Many of them were Presbyterians, who feared that their freedom to worship would be taken away from them or that they would be deprived of the right to vote, as Presbyterians were in England. Others were animated by a fundamental suspicion of British intentions toward America. They believed there was a British plot to force Americans to pay unjust taxes to enable England's aristocratic politicians and their followers to live in luxury.

Joseph McJunkin was one of the men who had refused to surrender. He had risen from private to major in the militia regiment from the Union district of South Carolina. After the fall of Charleston, he and his friends hid gunpowder and ammunition in hollow logs and thickets. But in June 1780, they were badly beaten by a battalion of loyalist neighbors and fled across the Broad River. They were joined by men from the Spartan, Laurens, and Newberry districts. At the Presbyterian Meeting House on Bullocks Creek, they debated whether to accept British protection. McJunkin and a few other men rose and vowed they would fight on. Finally someone asked those who wanted to fight to throw up their hats and clap their hands. "Every hat went up and the air resounded with clapping and shouts of defiance," McJunkin recalled.



Short, disciplined to the life of a soldier, yet plain and gentle in manner, Francis Marion (the figure at left) was equally brilliant as an officer of regulars and a partisan leader of militia. To the British he was as elusive as a fox, marching his brigade at night, rarely sleeping twice in the same camp, and vanishing into the swamps when opposed by a larger force.

A few days later, these men met Thomas Sumter, a former colonel in the South Carolina Continentals. He had fled to western South Carolina after the British burned his plantation. The holdouts asked him his opinion of the situation. "Our interests are the same. With me it is liberty or death," he said. They elected him their general and went to war.

Elsewhere in South Carolina, other men coalesced around another former Continental officer, Francis Marion. Still others followed Elijah Clarke, who operated along the border between South Carolina and Georgia. These partisans, seldom numbering more than 500 men and often as few as 50, struck at British outposts and supply routes and attacked groups of loyalists whom the British were arming and trying to organize into militia regiments. The British and loyalists grew exasperated. After the battle of Camden, Lord Cornwallis declared that anyone who signed a British parole and then switched sides would be hanged without a trial if captured. If a man refused to serve in the loyalist militia, he would be imprisoned and his property confiscated. At a convention of loyalist militia regiments on August 23, 1780, the members resolved that these orders should be ruthlessly applied. They added one other recommendation. Anyone who refused to serve in the king's militia should be drafted into the British regulars, where he would be forced to fight whether he liked it or not.

For the rest of 1780, a savage seesaw war raged along the Carolina frontier. Between engagements both sides exacted retaliation on prisoners and noncombatants. Elijah Clarke besieged Augusta with a mixed band of South Carolinians and Georgians. Forced to retreat by British reinforcements, he left about two dozen badly wounded men behind. The loyalist commander of Augusta, Thomas Browne, wounded in the siege, hanged 13 of them in the stairwell of his house, where he could watch them die from his bed. A rebel named Reed was visiting a neighbor's house when the landlady saw two loyalists approaching. She advised Reed to flee. Reed replied that they were old friends; he had known them all his life. He went outside to shake hands. The loyalists shot him dead. Reed's aged mother rode to a rebel camp in North Carolina and displayed her son's bloody pocketbook. The commander of the

camp asked for volunteers. Twenty-five men mounted their horses, found the murderers, and executed them.

In this sanguinary warfare, the rebels knew the side roads and forest tracks. They were expert, like Marion's men, at retreating into swamps. But the British also had some advantages. The rebels could do little to prevent retaliation against their homes and property. If a man went into hiding when the British or loyalists summoned him to fight in their militia, all his corn and livestock were liable to seizure, and his house might even be burned, leaving his wife and children destitute. This bitter and discouraging truth became more and more apparent as the year 1780 waned. Without a Continental army to back them up, Sumter and the other partisan leaders found it difficult to persuade men to fight.

Not even the greatest militia victory of the war, the destruction of a loyalist army of over a thousand men at Kings Mountain in October 1780, significantly altered the situation. Although loyalist support declined, the British army was untouched by this triumph. Moreover, many of the militiamen in the rebel army had come from remote valleys deep in the Appalachians, and they went home immediately, as militiamen were inclined to do. The men of western South Carolina were left with the British regulars still dominating four-fifths of the State, still ready to exact harsh retaliation against those who persisted in the rebellion.



Elijah Clarke, a colonel of Georgia militia, fought at a number of important actions in the civil war along the Southern frontier in 1780-81.

George Washington understood the problem. In an earlier campaign in the north, when the New Jersey militia failed to turn out, he had said that the people needed "an Army to look the Enemy in the Face." To replace the disgraced Horatio Gates, he appointed Nathanael Greene of Rhode Island as the commander of the Southern army. A 38-year-old Quaker who walked with a slight limp, Greene had become Washington's right-hand man in five years of war in the north. On December 2 he arrived in Charlotte, N.C., where Horatio Gates was trying to reorganize the remnants of the army shattered at Camden. Neither the numbers nor the appearance of the men were encouraging. There were 2,046 soldiers present and fit for duty. Of these, only 1,173 were Continentals. The rest were militia. Worse, as Greene told his friend the Marquis de Lafayette, if he counted as fit for duty only those soldiers who were properly

clothed and equipped, he had fewer than 800 men and provisions for only three days in camp. There was scarcely a horse or a wagon in the army and not a dollar of hard money in the military chest.

Among Greene's few encouraging discoveries in the army's camp at Charlotte was the news that Daniel Morgan had returned to the war and at that very moment was within 16 miles of the British base at Camden with a battalion of light infantry and what was left of the American cavalry under Lt. Col. William Washington. Angered by Congress's failure to promote him, Morgan had resigned his colonel's commission in 1779. The disaster at Camden and the threat of England's new southern strategy had persuaded him to forget his personal grievance. Congress had responded by making him a brigadier general.

Studying his maps, and knowing Morgan's ability to inspire militia and command light infantry, Nathanael Greene began to think the Old Wagoner, as Morgan liked to call himself, was the key to frustrating British plans to conquer North Carolina. Lord Cornwallis and the main British army were now at Winnsborough, S.C., about halfway between the British base at Camden and their vital back-country fort at Ninety Six. The British general commanded 3,324 regulars, twice the number of Greene's motley army, and all presumably well trained and equipped. Spies and scouts reported the earl was preparing to invade North Carolina for a winter campaign. North Carolina had, if anything, more loyalists than South Carolina. There was grave reason to fear that they would turn out at the sight of a British army and take that State out of the shaky American confederacy.

To delay, if not defeat, this potential disaster, Greene decided to divide his battered army and give more than half of it to Daniel Morgan. The Old Wagoner would march swiftly across the front of Cornwallis's army into western South Carolina and operate on his left flank and in his rear, threatening the enemy's posts at Ninety Six and Augusta, disrupting British communications, and—most important—encouraging the militia of western South Carolina to return to fight. "The object of this detachment," Greene wrote in his instructions to Morgan, "is to give protection to that part of the country and spirit up the people."

This was the army that Joseph McJunkin had ridden all night to warn. Lord Cornwallis had no intention of letting Nathanael Greene get away with this ingenious maneuver. Cornwallis had an answer to Morgan. His name was Banastre Tarleton.

Daniel Morgan might call him “Benny.” Most Americans called him “the Butcher” or “Bloody Tarleton.” A thick-shouldered, compact man of middle height, with bright red hair and a hard mouth, he was the most feared and hated British soldier in the South. In 1776 he had come to America, a 21-year-old cornet—the British equivalent of a second lieutenant. He was now a lieutenant colonel, a promotion so rapid for the British army of the time that it left older officers frigid with jealousy. Tarleton had achieved this spectacular rise almost entirely on raw courage and fierce energy. His father had been a wealthy merchant and Lord Mayor of Liverpool. He died while Tarleton was at Oxford, leaving him £5,000, which the young man promptly gambled and drank away, while ostensibly studying for the law in London. He joined the army and discovered he was a born soldier.

In America, he was a star performer from the start. In the fall of 1776, while still a cornet, he played a key role in capturing Maj. Gen. Charles Lee, second in command of the American army, when he unwisely spent the night at a tavern in New Jersey, several miles from his troops. Soon a captain, Tarleton performed ably for the next two years and in 1778 was appointed a brigade major of the British cavalry.



Charles Lee, an English general retired on half-pay at the outbreak of the war, threw in with Americans and received several important commands early in the war. His capture in late 1776 at a New Jersey tavern by dragoons under Banastre Tarleton was a celebrated event.

Tarleton again distinguished himself when the British army retreated from Philadelphia to New York in June 1778. At Monmouth Court House he began the battle by charging the American advance column and throwing it into confusion. In New York, sorting out his troops, the new British commander, Sir Henry Clinton, rewarded Tarleton with another promotion. While the British were in Philadelphia, various loyalists had recruited three troops of dragoons. In New York, officers—some loyalist, some British—recruited companies of infantry and more troops of dragoons from different segments of the loyalist population. One company was Scottish, two others English, a third American-born. Clinton combined these fragments into a 550-man unit that he christened the British Legion. Half cavalry, half infantry, a legion was designed to operate

the British Legion. Half cavalry, half infantry, a legion was designed to operate on the fringe of a main army as a quick-strike force. Banastre Tarleton was given command of the British Legion, which was issued green coats and tan breeches, unlike other loyalist regiments, who wore red coats with green facings.

Banastre Tarleton, Gentleman



Banastre Tarleton, only 26, was a short, thick-set, rather handsome redhead who was tireless and fearless in battle. Unlike Morgan, he had been born to privilege. Scion of a wealthy Liverpool mercantile family, he was Oxford educated and might have become a barrister except that he preferred the playing field to the classroom and the delights of London theatres and coffee houses to the study of law. After squandering a modest inheritance, he jumped at the chance to buy a commission in the King's Dragoons and serve in America. Eventually he came into command of the British Legion, a mounted and foot unit raised among American loyalists. Marked by their distinctive green uniforms, they soon became known as Tarleton's Green Horse. It was their ruthless ferocity that earned Tarleton the epithet, "Bloody Tarleton."

After the war, Tarleton fell in love with the beautiful Mary Robinson, a poet, playwright, and actress. Tarleton's memoir, *The Campaigns of 1780 and 1781 in the Southern Provinces*, owes much to her gifted pen.



Mary Robinson



Tarleton's birthplace on Water Street in Liverpool.



Under Gen. Benjamin Lincoln, the patriots suffered their worst defeat of the war. Bottled up by Sir Henry Clinton in the peninsula city of Charleston, he surrendered the entire Continental Army in the South—more than 5 000 men—

surrendered the entire Continental Army in the South — more than 8,000 men — in May 1780.

Sailing south with the royal army that besieged and captured Charleston, Tarleton and his Legion acted as a mobile screen, protecting the British rear against attacks by American cavalry and militia from the interior of the State. The young officer soon demonstrated a terrifying ability to strike suddenly and ferociously when the Americans least expected him. On May 6, 1780, at Lenuds Ferry, he surprised and virtually destroyed the American cavalry, forcing William Washington and many other officers and men to leap into the Santee River to escape him.

After Charleston surrendered, there was only one unit of regular American troops left in South Carolina, the 3d Virginia Continentals commanded by Col. Abraham Buford. He was ordered to retreat to North Carolina. Cornwallis sent Tarleton and his Legion in pursuit. Covering 105 miles in 54 hours, Tarleton caught up with the Americans at Waxhaws. The 380 Virginians were largely recruits, few of whom had seen action before. Tarleton and the Legion charged from front, flank, and rear. Buford foolishly ordered his men to hold their fire until the saber-swinging dragoons were on top of them. The American line was torn to fragments. Buford wheeled his horse and fled. Tarleton reportedly sabered an American officer as he tried to raise a white flag. Other Americans screamed for quarter, but some kept firing. A bullet killed Tarleton's horse and he crashed to the ground. This, he later claimed, aroused his men to a "vindictive asperity." They thought their leader had been killed. Dozens of Americans were bayoneted or sabered after they had thrown down their guns and surrendered.



The contemporary map shows the patriot defenses north of the city, the British siege lines, and warships of the Royal Navy that controlled the harbor waters.

One hundred and thirteen Americans were killed and 203 captured at Waxhaws. Of the captured, 150 were so badly wounded they were left on the battlefield. Throughout the Carolinas, the word of the massacre—which is what Americans called Waxhaws—passed from settlement to settlement. It did not inspire much trust in British benevolence among those who were being urged to surrender.



Tarleton's slaughter of Col. Abraham Buford's command at the Waxhaws gave the patriots a rallying cry—"Tarleton's quarter"—remembered to this day.

After helping to smash the American army at Camden with another devastating cavalry charge, Tarleton was ordered to pursue Thomas Sumter and his partisans. Pushing his men and horses at his usual pace in spite of the tropical heat of August, he caught up with Sumter's men at Fishing Creek. Sabering a few carelessly posted sentries, the British Legion swept down on the Carolinians as they lay about their camp, their arms stacked, half of them sleeping or cooking. Sumter leaped on a bareback horse and imitated Buford, fleeing for his life. Virtually the entire American force of more than 400 men was killed or captured. When the news was published in England, Tarleton became a national hero. In his official dispatches, Cornwallis called him "one of the most promising officers I ever knew."

But Sumter immediately began gathering a new force and Francis Marion and his raiders repeatedly emerged from the lowland swamps to harass communications with Charleston and punish any loyalist who declared for the king. Tarleton did not understand this stubborn resistance and liked it even less. A nauseating bout with yellow fever deepened his saturnine mood. Pursuing Marion along the Santee and Black Rivers, Tarleton ruthlessly burned the farmhouses of "violent rebels," as he called them. "The country is now convinced of the error of the insurrection," he wrote to Cornwallis. But Tarleton failed to catch "the damned old fox," Marion.

The British Legion had scarcely returned from this exhausting march when they were ordered out once more in pursuit of Sumter. On November 9, 1780, with a

new band of partisans, Sumter fought part of the British 63d Regiment, backed by a troop of Legion dragoons, at Fishdam Ford on the Broad River and mauled them badly. “I wish you would get three Legions, and divide yourself in three parts,” Cornwallis wrote Tarleton. “We can do no good without you.”

Once more the Legion marched for the back country. As usual, Tarleton’s pace was almost supernaturally swift. On November 20, 1780, he caught Sumter and his men as they were preparing to ford the Tyger River. But this time Tarleton’s fondness for headlong pursuit got him into serious trouble. He had left most of his infantry far behind him and pushed ahead with less than 200 cavalry and 90 infantry, riding two to a horse. Sumter had close to a thousand men and he attacked, backwoods style, filtering through the trees to pick off foot soldiers and horsemen. Tarleton ordered a bayonet charge. The infantry was so badly shot up, Tarleton had to charge with the cavalry to extricate them, exposing his dragoon to deadly rifle fire from other militiamen entrenched in a log tobacco house known as Blackstocks. The battle ended in a bloody draw. Sumter was badly wounded and his men abandoned the field to the green-coated dragoons, slipping across the Tyger in the darkness. Without their charismatic leader, Sumter’s militia went home.



This portrait of Tarleton and the illustration beneath of a troop of dragoons doing maneuvers appeared in a flattering biography shortly after he returned to England in 1782.

“Sumter is defeated,” Tarleton reported to Cornwallis, “his corps dispersed. But my Lord I have lost men—50 killed and wounded.” The war was becoming more and more disheartening to Tarleton. Deepening his black mood was news from home. His older brother had put him up for Parliament from Liverpool. The voters had rejected him. They admired his courage, but the American war was no longer popular in England.

While Cornwallis remained at Winnsborough, Tarleton returned from Blackstocks and camped at various plantations south of the Broad River. During his projected invasion of North Carolina, Cornwallis expected Tarleton and his Legion to keep the dwindling rebels of South Carolina dispersed to their homes. Thus the British commander would have no worries about the British base at Ninety Six, the key to the back country. The fort and surrounding settlement had been named by an early mapmaker in the course of measuring distances on the

Cherokee Path, an ancient Indian route from the mountains to the ocean. The district around Ninety Six was the breadbasket of South Carolina; it was also heavily loyalist. But a year of partisan warfare had made their morale precarious. The American-born commander of the fort, Col. John Harris Cruger, had recently warned Cornwallis that the loyalists “were wearied by the long continuance of the campaign ... and the whole district had determined to submit as soon as the rebels should enter it.” The mere hint of a threat to Ninety Six and the order it preserved in its vicinity was enough to send flutters of alarm through British headquarters.

There were flutters aplenty when Cornwallis heard from spies that Daniel Morgan had crossed the Broad River and was marching on Ninety Six. Simultaneously came news that William Washington, the commander of Morgan’s cavalry, had routed a group of loyalists at Hammonds Store and forced another group to abandon a fort not far from Ninety Six. At 5 a.m. on January 2, Lt. Henry Haldane, one of Cornwallis’s aides, rode into Tarleton’s camp and told him the news. Close behind Haldane came a messenger with a letter from Cornwallis: “If Morgan is ... anywhere within your reach, I should wish you to push him to the utmost.” Haldane rushed an order to Maj. Archibald McArthur, commander of the first battalion of the 71st Regiment, which was not far away, guarding a ford over the Broad River that guaranteed quick communication with Ninety Six. McArthur was to place his men under Tarleton’s command and join him in a forced march to rescue the crucial fort.



The little village of Ninety Six was a center of loyalist sentiment in the Carolina backcountry. Cornwallis mistakenly thought Morgan had designs on it and therefore sent Tarleton in pursuit, bringing on the battle of Cowpens. This map diagrams the siege that Gen. Nathanael Greene mounted against the post in May-June of 1781.

Tarleton obeyed with his usual speed. His dragoons ranged far ahead of his little army, which now numbered about 700 men. By the end of the day he concluded that there was no cause for alarm about Ninety Six. Morgan was nowhere near it. But his scouts reported that Morgan was definitely south of the Broad River, urging militia from North and South Carolina to join him.

Tarleton’s response to this challenge was almost inevitable. He asked Cornwallis for permission to pursue Morgan and either destroy him or force him to retreat

over the Broad River again. There, Cornwallis and his army could devour him.

The young cavalry commander outlined the operation in a letter to Cornwallis on January 4. He realized that he was all but giving orders to his general, and tactfully added: "I feel myself bold in offering my opinion [but] it flows from zeal for the public service and well grounded enquiry concerning the enemy's designs and operations." If Cornwallis approved the plan, Tarleton asked for reinforcements: a troop of cavalry from the 17th Light Dragoons and the infantrymen of the 7th Regiment of Royal Fusiliers, who were marching from Camden to reinforce Ninety Six.

Cornwallis approved the plan, including the reinforcements. As soon as they arrived, Tarleton began his march. January rain poured down, swelling every creek, turning the roads into quagmires. Cornwallis, with his larger army and heavy baggage train, began a slow advance up the east bank of the Broad River. As the commander in chief, he had more to worry about than Tarleton. Behind him was another British general, Sir Alexander Leslie, with 1,500 reinforcements. Cornwallis feared that Greene or Marion might strike a blow at them. The earl assumed that Tarleton was as mired by the rain and blocked by swollen watercourses as he was. On January 12, Cornwallis wrote to Leslie, who was being delayed by even worse mud in the lowlands: "I believe Tarleton is as much embarrassed with the waters as you are." The same day, Cornwallis reported to another officer, the commander in occupied Charleston: "The rains have put a total stop to Tarleton and Leslie." On this assumption, Cornwallis decided to halt and wait for Leslie to reach him.

Tarleton had not allowed the August heat of South Carolina to slow his pace. He was equally contemptuous of the January rains. His scouts reported that Morgan's army was at Grindal Shoals on the Pacolet River. To reach the patriots he had to cross two smaller but equally swollen streams, the Enoree and the Tyger. Swimming his horses, floating his infantry across on improvised rafts, he surmounted these obstacles and headed northeast, deep into the South Carolina back country. He did not realize that his column, which now numbered over a thousand men, was becoming more and more isolated. He assumed that Cornwallis was keeping pace with him on the east side of the Broad River, cowing the rebel militia there into staying home.



Gen. Alexander Leslie, veteran commander in America. His service spanned

actions from Salem Bridge in February 1775 to the British evacuation of Charleston in December 1782.

Tarleton also did not realize that this time, no matter how swiftly he advanced, he was not going to take the patriots by surprise. He was being watched by a man who was fighting with a hangman's noose around his neck.

3

Skyagunsta, the Wizard Owl, was what the Cherokees called 41-year-old Andrew Pickens. They both feared and honored him as a battle leader who had defeated them repeatedly on their home grounds. Born in Pennsylvania, Pickens had come to South Carolina as a boy. In 1765 he had married the beautiful Rebecca Calhoun and settled on Long Canes Creek in the Ninety Six district. Pickens was no speechmaker, but everyone recognized this slender man, who was just under 6 feet tall, as a leader. When he spoke, people listened. One acquaintance declared that he was so deliberate, he seemed at times to take each word out of his mouth and examine it before he said it. Pickens had been one of the leaders who repelled the British-inspired assaults on the back country by the Cherokee Indians in 1776 and carried the war into the red men's country, forcing them to plead for peace. By 1779 he was a colonel commanding one of the most dependable militia regiments in the State. When the loyalists, encouraged by the British conquest of Georgia in 1778-79, began to gather and plot to punish their rebel neighbors, Pickens led 400 men to assault them at Kettle Creek on the Savannah River. In a fierce, hour-long fight, he whipped them although they outnumbered him almost two to one.

After Charleston surrendered, Pickens' military superior in the Ninety Six district, Brig. Gen. Andrew Williamson, was the only high-ranking official left in South Carolina. The governor John Rutledge had fled to North Carolina, the legislature had dispersed, the courts had collapsed. Early in June 1780, Williamson called together his officers and asked them to vote on whether they should continue to resist. Only eight officers opposed immediate surrender. In Pickens' own regiment only two officers and four enlisted men favored resistance. The rest saw no hope of stopping the British regular army advancing toward them from Charleston. Without a regular army of their own to match the British, they could envision only destruction of their homes and desolation for their families if they resisted.

Andrew Pickens was among these realists who had accepted the surrender terms offered by the British. At his command, his regiment of 300 men stacked their guns at Ninety Six and went home. As Pickens understood the terms, he and his men were paroled on their promise not to bear arms against the king. They became neutrals. The British commander of Ninety Six, Colonel Cruger, seemed to respect this opinion. Cruger treated Pickens with great deference. The motive for this delicate treatment became visible in a letter Cruger sent Cornwallis on November 27.

“I think there is more than a possibility of getting a certain person in the Long Canes settlement to accept of a command,” Cruger wrote. “And then I should most humbly be of opinion that every man in the country would declare and act for His Majesty.”

It was a tribute to Pickens’ influence as a leader. He was also a man of his word. Even when Sumter, Clarke, and other partisan leaders demonstrated that there were many men in South Carolina ready to keep fighting, Pickens remained peaceably at home on his plantation at Long Canes. Tales of Tarleton’s cruelty at Waxhaws, of British and loyalist vindictiveness in other districts of the State undoubtedly reached him. But no acts of injustice had been committed against him or his men. The British were keeping their part of the bargain and he would keep his part.

Then Cornwallis’s aide, Haldane, appeared at Ninety Six and summoned Pickens. He offered him a colonel’s commission in the royal militia and a promise of protection. There were also polite hints of the possibility of a monetary reward for switching sides. Pickens agreed to ride down to Charleston and talk over the whole thing with the British commander there. The visit was delayed by partisan warfare in the Ninety Six district, stirred by the arrival of Nathanael Greene to take command of the remnant of the American regular army in Charlotte. Greene urged the wounded Sumter and the Georgian Clarke to embody their men and launch a new campaign. Sumter urged Pickens to break his parole, call out his regiment, and march with him to join Greene. Pickens refused to leave Long Canes.



Andrew Pickens, a lean and austere frontiersman of Scotch-Irish origins, ranked with Francis Marion and Thomas Sumter as major partisan leaders of the war.

In desperation, the rebels came to him. Elijah Clarke led a band of Georgians and South Carolinians to the outskirts of Long Canes, on their march to join Greene. Many men from Pickens' old regiment broke their paroles and joined them. Clarke ordered Maj. James McCall, one of Pickens' favorite officers and one of two who had refused to surrender at Ninety Six, to kidnap Pickens and bring him before an improvised court-martial board. Accused of preparing to join the loyalists, Pickens calmly admitted that the British were making him offers. So far he had refused them. Even if former friends made good on their threat to court-martial and hang him, he could not break his pledged word of honor to remain neutral.

The frustrated Georgians and South Carolinians let Pickens go home. On December 12, Cruger sent a detachment of regulars and loyalist militia to attack the interlopers. The royalists surprised the rebels and routed them, wounding Clarke and McCall and scattering the survivors. Most of the Georgians drifted back to their home state and the Carolinians straggled toward Greene in North Carolina.

The battle had a profound effect on Andrew Pickens. Friends, former comrades-in-arms, had been wounded, humiliated. He still hesitated to take the final step and break his parole. His strict Presbyterian conscience, his soldier's sense of honor, would not permit it. But he went to Ninety Six and told Colonel Cruger that he could not accept a commission in the royal militia. Cruger sighed and revealed what he had been planning to do since he started wooing Pickens. In a few days, on orders from Cornwallis, the loyalist colonel was going to publish a proclamation which would permit no one to remain neutral. It would require everyone around Ninety Six to come to the fort, swear allegiance to the king, and enlist in the royal militia.

Pickens said his conscience would not permit him to do this. If the British threatened him with punishment for his refusal, it would be a violation of his parole and he would consider himself free to join the rebels. One British officer, who had become a friend and admirer of the resolute Pickens, warned him: "You will campaign with a halter around your neck. If we catch you, we will hang you."

Pickens decided to take the risk. He rode about Long Canes calling out his regiment. The response was somewhat discouraging. Only about 70 men turned out. Coordinating their movements with Colonel Washington's raid on the loyalists at Hammonds Store, they joined the patriot cavalry and rode past

loyalists at Hammond's store, they joined the patriot cavalry and rode past Ninety Six to Morgan's camp on the Pacolet.

The numbers Pickens brought with him were disappointing. But he and his men knew the back country intimately. They were the eyes and ears Morgan's little army desperately needed. Morgan immediately asked Pickens to advance to a position about midway between Fair Forest Creek and the Tyger River and send his horsemen ranging out from that point in all directions to guard against a surprise attack by Banastre Tarleton.

The Wizard Owl and his men mounted their horses and rode away to begin their reconnaissance. General Morgan soon knew enough about the enemy force coming after him to make him fear for his army's survival.

4

Daniel Morgan might call Banastre Tarleton "Benny" for the entertainment of young militiamen like Joseph McJunkin. But Morgan had been fighting the British for five years. He was as close to being a professional soldier as any American of his time. He knew Banastre Tarleton was no joke. In fact, the casual style of his decision to reunite his cavalry and infantry at the Thompson plantation on Thicketty Creek disguised a decision to retreat. The march to Thicketty Creek put an additional 10 miles between him and the aggressive British cavalryman. Behind the mask of easy confidence Morgan wore for his men, there was a very worried general.

As soon as he crossed the Broad River and camped at Grindal Shoals on the north bank of the Pacolet on December 25, 1780, Morgan began sending messengers to the men of western Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina, urging them to turn out and support him. The response had been disheartening. Pickens, as we have seen, was unable to muster more than a fraction of his old regiment. From Georgia came only a small detachment of about 100 men under the command of Lt. Col. James Jackson and Maj. John Cunningham. Because their leader Elijah Clarke was out of action from his wound at Long Canes, the Georgians were inclined to stay home. Sumter, though almost recovered from his wound, sulked on the east side of the Broad River. He felt Greene had sent Morgan into his sphere of command without properly consulting him.

Arms and Tactics

The armies fought the way they did—on open ground in long lines of musket-wielding infantry standing two and three ranks deep—because that was the most rational way to use the weapons they had.

The main weapon of this combat was the muzzle-loading, smooth-bore, flint-lock musket, equipped with a 16-inch bayonet. It hurled a one-ounce lead ball of .70 to .80 calibre fairly accurately up to 75 yards, but distance scarcely mattered. The object was to break up the enemy's formations with volleys and then rout them with cold steel. The British were masters of these linear tactics, and Washington and his commanders spent the war trying to instill the same discipline in their Continentals so that they could stand up to redcoats on equal terms in battle.

The American rifle was not the significant weapon legend later made it out to be. Though accurate at great distances, it was slow to load and useless in open battle because it was not equipped with a bayonet. But in the hands of skirmishers the rifle could do great damage, as the British found out at Cowpens.

French musket, calibre .69

British Brown Bess, calibre .75

British dragoon carbine

American rifle

Pistols *Cavalrymen and mounted officers nearly always carried a brace of pistols. Though wildly inaccurate, they were useful in emergencies when formal combat broke down and a foe was only a few feet away.*

Officer's Pistol

American dragoon pistol

Powder horns of the type used by rifle-carrying militia at Cowpens: each was usually made by the man who carried it.

Edged Weapons came in many varieties. The most important for hand-to-hand fighting were bayonets and swords. For cavalrymen, the sword was more useful than firearms. It was "the most destructive and almost the only necessary weapon a Dragoon carries," said William Washington. They used two types: the saber and the broadsword. Both are shown here.

Officers, foot as well as mounted, carried swords, often for fighting, sometimes only for dress. The small-sword (shown at left below) was popular with Continental officers.

Officers' swords

American dragoon sabre

British dragoon sabre, model 1768

Pole Arms were in common use. Washington wanted his foot officers to direct their men and not be distracted by their own firearms. He therefore armed them with a spear-like weapon called a spontoon. It became a badge of rank as well as a weapon.

American officers' spontoons

Morgan's highest hopes had been focused on North Carolina, which had thus far been relatively untouched by the British. The commander of the militia in the back country was Brig. Gen. William Davidson, a former Continental officer whom Morgan had known at Valley Forge. An energetic, committed man, popular with the militia, Davidson had been expected to muster from 600 to 1,000 men. Instead, Morgan got a letter from him with the doleful report: "I have not ninety men." An Indian incursion on the western frontier had drawn off many of the militia and inclined others to stay home to protect their families. On December 28, Davidson rode into Morgan's camp with only 120 men. He said that he hoped to have another 500 mustered at Salisbury in the next week and rode off to find them, leaving Morgan muttering in dismay.

Morgan had eagerly accepted this independent command because he thought at least 2,500 militiamen would join his 500 Continentals and Virginia six-months men. With an army that size, he could have besieged or even stormed the British stronghold at Ninety Six. His present force seemed too small to do the enemy any damage. But it was large enough to give its commander numerous headaches. In addition to the major worry of annihilation by the enemy, food was scarce. The country along the Pacolet had been plundered and fought over for so long, there was nothing left to requisition from the farms. On December 31, in a letter to Greene, Morgan predicted that in a few days supplies would be "unattainable."

What to do? The only practical move he could see for his feeble army was a march into Georgia. The British outpost at Augusta was weaker and more isolated than Ninety Six. Even here, Morgan was cautious. "I have consulted with General Davidson and Colonel Pickens whether we could secure a safe retreat, should we be pushed by a superior force. They tell me it can be easily effected," he wrote Greene, asking his approval of this plan.

Morgan was reluctant to advance beyond the Pacolet. The reason was rooted in his keen understanding of the psychology of the average militiaman. He wanted to come out, fight and go home as soon as possible. He did not want to fight if the regular army that was supposed to look the enemy in the face seemed more interested in showing the enemy their backs. "Were we to advance, and be constrained to retreat, the consequences would be very disagreeable," Morgan told Greene, speaking as one general to another. The militia, he was saying, would go home.

Greene was equally anxious about Morgan. Writing from Cheraw Hills on the

Greene was equally anxious about Morgan. Writing from Cheraw Hills on the Pee Dee River on December 29, the southern commander told Morgan of the arrival of Gen. Alexander Leslie in Charleston with reinforcements. This news meant the British would almost certainly advance soon. "Watch their motions very narrowly and take care to guard against a surprise," he wrote. A week later, in another letter, he repeated the warning. "The enemy and the Tories both will try to bring you into disgrace ... to prevent your influence upon the militia, especially the weak and wavering."

Greene vetoed Morgan's expedition into Georgia. He did not think Morgan was strong enough to accomplish much. "The enemy ... secure in their fortifications, will take no notice of your movement," he predicted. Greene was persuaded that Cornwallis would strike at his half of the army in their camp at Cheraw Hills, and he did not want Morgan in Georgia if this threat materialized. Ignoring Morgan's worries about feeding his men, Greene told him to stay where he was, on the Pacolet or "in the neighborhood," and await an opportunity to attack the British rear when they marched into North Carolina.

Morgan replied with a lament. He reiterated his warning that "forage [for the horses] and provisions are not to be had." He insisted there was "but one alternative, either to retreat or move into Georgia." A retreat, he warned, "will be attended with the most fatal consequences. The spirit which now begins to pervade the people and call them into the field, will be destroyed. The militia who have already joined will desert us and it is not improbable but that a regard for their own safety will induce them to join the enemy."

That last line is grim evidence of the power of the British policy of forcing everyone to serve in the loyalist militia. But Nathanael Greene remained adamant. He reported to Morgan more bad news, which made a march into Georgia even more inadvisable. Another British general, with 2,500 men, had landed in Virginia and was attacking that vital State, upon which the southern army depended for much of its supplies. It made no sense to send some of the army's best troops deeper into the South, when Virginia might call on Greene and Morgan for aid. Almost casually Greene added: "Col. Tarleton is said to be on his way to pay you a visit. I doubt not but he will have a decent reception and a proper dismissal."

This was a strange remark for a worried general to make. From other letters Greene wrote around this time, it is evident that he had received a number of conflicting reports about Tarleton's strength and position. The American

commander was also unsure about British intentions. He assumed that Cornwallis and Tarleton were moving up the opposite sides of the Broad River in concert. Since the main British column under Cornwallis had all but stopped advancing, Greene assumed Tarleton had stopped too and that Morgan was in no immediate danger.

Around this time, a man who had known Daniel Morgan as a boy in Virginia visited his camp. Richard Winn, after whom Winnsborough was named—and whose mansion Cornwallis was using as his headquarters—discussed Tarleton’s tactics with his old friend. Winn told Morgan that Tarleton’s favorite mode of fighting was by surprise. “He never brings on [leads] his attacks himself,” Winn said. He prefers to send in two or three troops of horse, “whose goal is to throw the other party into confusion. Then Tarleton attacks with his reserve and cuts them to pieces.”

Much as he dreaded the thought of a retreat, Morgan was too experienced a soldier not to prepare for one. He sent his quartermaster across the Broad River with orders to set up magazines of supplies for his army. This officer returned with dismaying news. General Sumter had refused to cooperate with this request and directed his subordinates to obey no orders from Morgan.

Adding to Morgan’s supply woes was a Carolina military custom. Every militiaman brought his horse to camp with him. This meant that Morgan had to find forage for over 450 horses (counting William Washington’s cavalry), each of whom ate 25 to 30 pounds of oats and hay a day. “Could the militia be persuaded to change their fatal mode of going to war,” Morgan groaned to Greene, “much provision might be saved; but the custom has taken such deep root that it cannot be abolished.”

Bands of militiamen constantly left the army to hunt for forage. This practice made it impossible for Morgan to know how many men he had in his command. In desperation, he ordered his officers, both Continental and militia, to call the roll every two hours. This measure only gave him more bad news. On January 15, after retreating from the Pacolet to Thicketty Creek, he reported to Greene that he had only 340 militia with him, but did not expect “to have more than two-thirds of these to assist me, should I be attacked, for it is impossible to keep them collected.”

Making Morgan feel even more like a military job was a personal problem. The incessant rain and the damp January cold had awakened an illness that he had

contracted fighting in Canada during the winter of 1775-76, a rheumatic inflammation of the sciatic nerve in his hip. It made riding a horse agony for Morgan.

In his tent on Thicketty Creek, where he had rendezvoused with William Washington and his 80 cavalymen, who had been getting their horses shod at Wofford's iron works, Morgan all but abandoned any hope of executing the mission on which Greene had sent him. "My force is inadequate," he wrote. "Upon a full and mature deliberation I am confirmed in the opinion that nothing can be effected by my detachment in this country, which will balance the risks I will be subjected to by remaining here. The enemy's great superiority in numbers and our distance from the main army, will enable Lord Cornwallis to detach so superior a force against me, as to render it essential to our safety to avoid coming to action."

It would be best, Morgan told Greene, if he were recalled with his little band of Continentals and Andrew Pickens or William Davidson left to command the back-country militia. Without the regulars to challenge them, the British were less likely to invade the district and under Pickens' leadership the rebels would be able to keep "a check on the disaffected"—the Tories—"which," Morgan added mournfully, "is all I can effect."

When he wrote these words on January 15, Morgan was still unaware of what was coming at him. From the reports of Pickens' scouts, he had begun to worry that Tarleton might have more than his 550-man British Legion with him. With the help of Washington's cavalry, he felt confident that he could beat off an attack by the Legion. But what if Tarleton had additional men? "Col. Tarleton has crossed the Tyger at Musgrove's Mill," Morgan told Greene. "His force we cannot learn."

Into Morgan's camp galloped more scouts from Pickens. They brought news that Morgan made the last sentence of his letter.

"We have just learned that Tarleton's force is from eleven to twelve hundred British."

The last word was the significant one. *British*. Twelve hundred regulars, trained troops, saber-swinging dragoons and bayonet-wielding infantry like the men who had sent the militia running for their lives at Camden and then cut the Continentals to pieces. Gen. Daniel Morgan could see only one alternative—

retreat.

5

Until he got this information on the numbers and composition of Tarleton's army, Morgan seems to have toyed with the possibility of ambushing the British as they crossed the Pacolet. He left strong detachments of his army at the most likely fords. At the very least, he may have wanted to make the crossing a bloody business for the British, perhaps killing some of their best officers, even Tarleton himself. If he could repulse or delay Tarleton at the river, Morgan hoped he could gain enough time to retreat to a ford across the upper Broad, well out of reach of Cornwallis on the other side of the river. Pickens had kept Morgan well informed of the sluggish advance of the main British army. He knew they were far to the south, a good 30 miles behind Tarleton.

North of the Broad, Morgan reasoned they could be easily joined by the 500 North Carolina militia William Davidson had promised him as well as South Carolina men from that district. If Tarleton continued the pursuit, they could give battle on the rugged slopes of Kings Mountain, where the cavalry of the British Legion would be useless.

Morgan undoubtedly discussed this plan with the leaders of the militiamen who were already with him—Joseph McDowell of North Carolina, whose men had fought at Kings Mountain, James Jackson and John Cunningham of Georgia, James McCall, Thomas Brandon, William Bratton and other South Carolinians, perhaps also Andrew Pickens. They did not have much enthusiasm for it. They warned Morgan that at least half the militia, especially the South Carolinians, would be inclined to go home rather than retreat across the Broad. In the back country, men perceived rivers as dividing lines between districts. Most of the South Carolina men in camp came from the west side of the Broad. Moreover, with Sumter hostile, there was no guarantee that they would be able to persuade many men on the other side of the river to join them.

In this discussion, it seems likely that these militia leaders mentioned the Cowpens as a good place to fight Tarleton on the south side of the river. The grazing ground was a name familiar to everyone in the back country. It was where the militia had assembled before the battle of Kings Mountain the previous fall. Messengers could be sent into every district within a day's ride to urge laggards to join them there.

Morgan mulled this advice while his men guarded the fords of the Pacolet. As dusk fell on January 15, Tarleton and his army appeared on the south bank of the river. He saw the guards and wheeled, marching up the stream toward a ford near Wofford's iron works. On the opposite bank, Morgan's men kept pace with him, step for step. Then, with no warning, the British disappeared into the night. Retreating? Making camp? No one knew. It was too risky to venture across the swollen river to follow him. The British Legion cavalry always guarded Tarleton's flanks and rear.

On the morning of the 16th, a militia detachment miles down the river in the opposite direction made an alarming discovery. Tarleton was across! He had doubled back in the dark and marched most of the night to cross at Easterwood Shoals. He was only 6 miles from Morgan's camp on Thicketty Creek. Leaping on their horses, the guards galloped to Morgan with the news.

Morgan's men were cooking breakfast. Out of his tent charged the general to roar orders at them, the wagoners, the infantry, the cavalymen. Prepare to march immediately! The men grabbed their half-cooked cornmeal cakes and stuffed them into their mouths. The militia and the cavalry ran for their horses, the wagoners hitched their teams, the Continentals formed ranks, and the column got underway. Morgan pressed forward, ignoring the pain in his hip, demanding more and more speed from his men. He headed northwest, toward Cowpens, on the Green River Road, a route that would also take him to the Island Ford across the Broad River, about 6 miles beyond Cowpens.

All day the men slogged along the slick, gooey roads, Morgan at the head of the column setting a relentless pace. His sciatic hip tormented him. Behind him, the militiamen were expending "many a hearty curse" on him, one of them later recalled. As Nathanael Greene wryly remarked, in the militia every man considered himself a general.

But Daniel Morgan was responsible for their lives and the lives of his Continentals, some of whom had marched doggedly from battlefield to battlefield for over four years. In the company of the Delaware Continentals who served beside the Marylanders in the light infantry brigade, there was a lieutenant named Thomas Anderson who kept track of the miles he had marched since they headed south in May 1780. At the end of each day he entered in his journal the ever-growing total. By January 16, it was 1,435. No matter what the militia thought of him, Daniel Morgan was not going to throw away such men in a battle simply to prove his courage

a battle simply to prove his courage.

Seldom has there been a better example of the difference between the professional and the amateur soldier. In his letters urging militiamen to join him, Morgan had warned them against the futility of fighting in such small detachments. He had asked them to come into his camp and subject themselves to “order and discipline ... so that I may be enabled to direct you ... to the advantage of the whole.”

In the same letters, Morgan had made a promise to these men. “I will ask you to encounter no dangers or difficulties, but what I shall participate in.” If he retreated across the Broad, he would be exposing the men who refused to go with him to Tarleton’s policy of extermination by fire and sword. If they went with him, their families, their friends, their homes would be abandoned to the young lieutenant colonel’s vengeance.

This conflict between prudence and his promise must have raged in Morgan’s mind as his army toiled along the Green River Road. It was hard marching. The road dipped into hollows and looped around small hills. Swollen creeks cut across it. The woods were thick on both sides of it. At dusk, the Americans emerged from the forest onto a flat, lightly wooded tableland. At least, it looked flat at first glance. As Morgan led his men into it, he noted that the ground rose gradually to a slight crest, then dipped and rose to another slightly higher crest. Oak and hickory trees were dotted throughout the more or less rectangular area, but there was practically no underbrush. This was the Cowpens, a place where back-country people pastured their cattle and prepared them to be driven to market.

In the distance, Morgan could see the Blue Ridge Mountains, which rise from the flat country beyond the Broad like a great rampart. They were 30 miles away. If they could reach them, the army was safe. But militia scouts brought in grim news. The river was rising. It would be a difficult business crossing at Island Ford in the dark. The ford was still 6 miles away, and the men were exhausted from their all-day march. If they rested at Cowpens and tried to cross the river the next morning, Banastre Tarleton, that soldier who liked to march by night, would be upon them, ready to slash them to pieces.

Perhaps it was that report which helped Morgan make his decision. One suspects he almost welcomed the news that the army was, for all practical purposes, trapped and fighting was the only alternative. There was enough of the citizen-soldier in Morgan to dislike retreating almost as much as the average militiaman

soldier in Morgan to dislike retreating almost as much as the average minuteman.

The more Morgan studied the terrain around him, the more he liked it. The militia leaders were right. This was the best place to fight Tarleton. Sitting on his horse, looking down the slope to the Green River Road, Morgan noted the way the land fell off to the left and right toward several creeks. The Cowpens was bordered by marshy ground that would make it difficult for Tarleton to execute any sweeping flank movements with his cavalry. As his friend Richard Winn had told him, that was not Tarleton's style, anyway. He was more likely to come straight at the Americans with his infantry and cavalry in a headlong charge. Experience told Morgan there were ways to handle such an assault—tactics that 26-year-old Banastre Tarleton had probably never seen.

Now the important thing was to communicate the will to fight. Turning to his officers, Morgan said, "On this ground I will beat Benny Tarleton or I will lay my bones."

6

Eleven to twelve hundred British, Daniel Morgan had written. Ironically, as Morgan ordered another retreat from this formidable foe, the British were barricading themselves in some log houses on the north bank of the Pacolet River, expecting an imminent attack from the patriots. Their spies had told them that Morgan had 3,000 men, and Tarleton was taking no chances. After seizing this strong point, only a few miles below Morgan's camp, he sent out a cavalry patrol. They soon reported that the Americans had "decamped." Tarleton immediately advanced to Morgan's abandoned campsite, where his hungry soldiers were delighted to find "plenty of provisions which they had left behind them, half cooked."

Nothing stirred Banastre Tarleton's blood more than a retreating enemy. British soldiers, famed for their tenacity in war, have often been compared to the bulldog. But Tarleton was more like the bloodhound. A fleeing foe meant the chance of an easy victory. It was not only instinct, it was part of his training as a cavalryman.

"Patrols and spies were immediately dispatched to observe the Americans," Tarleton later recalled. The British Legion dragoons were ordered to follow Morgan until dark. Then the job was turned over to "other emissaries"—loyalists. Tarleton had about 50 with him to act as scouts and spies. Early that

evening, January 16, probably around the time that Morgan was deciding to fight at Cowpens, a party of loyalists brought in a militia colonel who had wandered out of the American line of march, perhaps in search of forage for his horse. Threatened with instant hanging, the man talked. He told Tarleton that Morgan hoped to stop at Cowpens and gather more militia. But the captive said that Morgan then intended to get across the Broad River, where he thought he would be safe.

The information whetted Tarleton's appetite. It seemed obvious to him that he should "hang upon General Morgan's rear" to cut off any militia reinforcements that might show up. If Morgan tried to cross the Broad, Tarleton would be in a position to "perplex his design," as he put it—a stuffy way of saying he could cut him to pieces. Around midnight, other loyalist scouts brought in a rumor of more American reinforcements on their way—a "corps of mountaineers." This sent a chill through the British, even through Tarleton. It sounded like the return of the mountain men who had helped destroy the loyalist army at Kings Mountain. It became more and more obvious to Tarleton that he should attack Morgan as soon as possible.

About three in the morning of the 17th of January, Tarleton called in his sentries and ordered his drummers to rouse his men. Leaving 35 baggage wagons and 70 Negro slaves with a 100-man guard commanded by a lieutenant, he marched his sleepy men down the rutted Green River Road, the same route Morgan had followed the previous day. The British found the marching hard in the dark. The ground, Tarleton later wrote, was "broken, and much intersected by creeks and ravines." Ahead of the column and on both flanks scouts prowled the woods to prevent an ambush.

Describing the march, Tarleton also gave a precise description of his army. Three companies of light infantry, supported by the infantry of the British Legion, formed his vanguard. The light infantry were all crack troops, most of whom had been fighting in America since the beginning of the war. One company was from the 16th Regiment and had participated in some of the swift, surprise attacks for which light infantry was designed. They had been part of the British force that killed and wounded 150 Americans in a night assault at Paoli, Pa., in the fall of 1777. The light company of the 71st Regiment had a similar record, having also been part of the light infantry brigade that the British organized early in the war.



Music made the soldier's life more tolerable on the march and in camp. But the most important use was in battle. Both the drum and the fife conveyed signals and orders over the din and confusion far better than the human voice. This iron fife is an original 18th-century instrument. The drum, according to tradition, was carried in the war.

With these regulars marched another company of light infantry whose memories were not so grand—the green-coated men of the Prince of Wales Loyal American Volunteers. Northern loyalists, they had been in the war since 1777. They had seen little fighting until they sailed south in 1780. After the fall of Charleston, Cornwallis had divided them into detachments and used them to garrison small posts, with disastrous results. In August 1780 at Hanging Rock, Sumter had attacked one detachment, virtually annihilating it. The colonel of the regiment was cashiered for cowardice. Another detachment was mauled by Francis Marion at Great Savannah around the same time. It was hardly a brilliant record. But this company of light infantry, supposedly the boldest and best of the regiment, might be eager to seek revenge for their lost comrades.

Tarleton's Legion

Tarleton gave the Carolinas a foretaste of modern war. His Legion was a fast-moving, hard-hitting combat team, accounted the best in the British army at that stage of the war. Its specialty was relentless pursuit followed by all-out attack. In Tarleton's hands, the Legion became a weapon of terror directed at civilian and soldier alike. As in modern war, this tactic spawned as much partisan resistance as fear and was ultimately self-defeating.

The figures across these pages represent the main units of the coolly efficient battle machine that Tarleton led onto the field that winter day.



17th Dragoons • Private, 16th Light Infantry • Legion cavalry • Private, 7th Fusiliers • Royal Artillery • Private, 71st Highlanders

Behind the light infantry marched the first battalion of the Royal Fusiliers of the 7th Regiment. This was one of the oldest regiments in the British army, with a

proud history that went back to 1685. Known as the “City of London” regiment, it had been in America since 1773. A detachment played a vital part in repulsing the December 31, 1775, attack on Quebec, which wrecked American plans to make Canada the 14th State. Among the 426 Americans captured was Daniel Morgan. Few if any of the men in Tarleton’s ranks had been in that fight. The 167-man battalion were all new recruits. When they arrived in Charleston early in December, the British commander there had described them to Cornwallis as “so bad, not above a third can possibly move with a regiment.”

The British government was having problems recruiting men for America. It had never been easy to persuade Englishmen to join the army and endure its harsh discipline and low pay. Now, with the war in America growing more and more unpopular, army recruiters were scouring the jails and city slums. Cornwallis had decided to use these new recruits as garrison troops at Ninety Six. Tarleton, as we have seen earlier, had borrowed them for his pursuit. Although the 7th’s motto was *Nec aspera terrent* (“hardships do not frighten us”), it must have been an unnerving experience for these men, little more than a month after a long, debilitating sea voyage, to find themselves deep in the backwoods of South Carolina, marching through the cold, wet darkness to their first battle.

Undoubtedly worsening the Fusiliers’ morale was the low opinion their officers had of Banastre Tarleton. The commander of the regiment, Maj. Timothy Newmarsh, had stopped at a country house for the night about a week ago, during the early stage of the pursuit, and had not been discreet in voicing his fears for the safety of the expedition. He said he was certain they would be defeated, because almost every officer in the army detested Tarleton, who had been promoted over the heads of men who had been in the service before he was born.

Behind the Royal Fusiliers trudged a 200-man battalion of the 71st Scottish Highlanders (Fraser’s), who probably did not find the night march through the woods as forbidding as the city men of the Fusiliers. At least half were relatively new recruits who had arrived in America little more than a year ago. The rest were veterans who had been campaigning in the rebellious colonies since 1776. They had sailed south to help the British capture Georgia in 1778 and had fought well in one of the most devastating royal victories of the southern campaign, the rout of the Americans at Briar Creek, Ga., in early 1779. They were commanded by Maj. Archibald McArthur, a tough veteran who had served with the Scottish Brigade in the Dutch army, considered one of the finest groups of fighting men

in Europe.

Between the 71st and the 7th Regiments plodded some 18 blue-coated royal artillerymen, leading horses carrying two brass cannon and 60 rounds of round shot and case shot (also known as canister because each “case” was full of smaller bullet-size projectiles that scattered in flight). These light guns were considered an important innovation when they were introduced into the British army in 1775. Because they could be dismantled and carried on horses, they could be moved over rough terrain impassable to ordinary artillery with its cumbersome ammunition wagons. The two guns Tarleton had with him could also be fitted with shafts that enabled four men to carry them around a battlefield, if the ground was too muddy or rough for their carriages. With the shafts, they resembled grasshoppers, and this was what artillerymen, fond of nicknames for their guns, called them.

The cannon added to Tarleton’s confidence. They could hurl a 3-pound round shot almost 1,000 yards. There was little likelihood that Morgan had any artillery with him. All the southern army’s artillery had been captured at Camden. These guns with Tarleton may have been two of the captured pieces, which had originally been captured from the British at Saratoga in 1777.

John Eager Howard, Citizen-soldier



John Eager Howard

Few field officers served the Continental Army with greater skill or devotion to duty than John Eager Howard. When the revolution broke out, he was 23, the son of a landed Maryland family, brought up in an atmosphere of ease and comfort. He saw his first hostile fire as a captain of militia at White Plains (1776). The next year, as a major in the regulars, he helped lead the 4th Maryland at Germantown. In the Southern Campaign of 1780-81, regiments he led fought with great courage at Camden, Cowpens, Guilford Courthouse, Hobkirks Hill, and Eutaw Springs. Nathanael Greene considered Howard “as good an officer as the world affords.” After the war, ‘Light-Horse Harry’ Lee described Howard as “always to be found where the battle raged, pressing into close action to wrestle with fixed bayonet.”



The silver medal awarded by Congress to Howard for service at Cowpens.



Belvidere, the elegant estate that John Eager Howard built after the Revolution, stood in what is now downtown Baltimore. It was torn down a century ago and the land is now occupied by row houses.

Behind the infantry and artillery rode the cavalry of the British Legion and a 50-man troop of the 17th Light Dragoons, giving Tarleton about 350 horsemen. In scabbards dangling from straps over their shoulders were the fearsome sabers that could lop off a man's arm with a single stroke. The Legion cavalry were, relatively speaking, amateurs, with only their courage and belief in their cause to animate them. The 17th Dragoons were regulars to the core, intensely proud of their long tradition. On their brass helmets they wore a death's head and below it a scroll with the words "or glory." They and their officers were somewhat disdainful of the British Legion.



A helmet of the 17th Light Dragoons, c. 1780.

Although their reputation among the patriots was good, the Legion had several times exhibited cowardice unthinkable to a 17th dragoon. When the British army advanced into Charlotte in the fall of 1780, they had been opposed by 75 or 80 back-country riflemen. Tarleton was ill with yellow fever and his second in command, Maj. George Hanger, had ordered them to charge the Americans. The Legion refused to budge. Not even the exhortations of Cornwallis himself stirred them until infantry had dislodged the riflemen from cover. They apparently remembered the punishment they had taken at Blackstocks, when Tarleton's orders had exposed them to sharpshooters.

As dawn began turning the black night sky to charcoal gray, Tarleton ordered a select group of cavalry to the front of his infantry. They soon collided with American scouts on horseback and captured two of them. These captives told them that Morgan and his men were only a few miles away. Tarleton immediately ordered two troops of the Legion cavalry, under one of his best officers, Capt. David Ogilvie, to reinforce his main force. Ogilvie called into

officers, Capt. David Oglivie, to reinforce his vanguard. Oglivie galloped into the murky dawn. Within a half hour, one of his troopers came racing back with unexpected news. The patriots were not retreating! They were drawn up in an open wood in battle formation.

Tarleton halted his army and summoned his loyalist guides. They instantly recognized the place where Morgan had chosen to fight—the Cowpens. It was familiar to everyone who had visited or lived in the South Carolina back country. They gave Tarleton a detailed description of the battleground. The woods were open and free from swamps. The Broad River was about six miles away.

The ground, Tarleton decided, was made to order for the rebels' destruction. In fact, America could not produce a place more suitable to his style of war. His bloodhound instinct dominant, Banastre Tarleton assumed that Morgan, having run away from him for two days, was still only trying to check his advance and gain time to retreat over the Broad River. Morgan failed to stop him at the Pacolet. He would fail even more disastrously here. With six miles of open country in the Americans' rear, Tarleton looked forward to smashing Morgan's ranks with an infantry attack and then unleashing his Legion horsemen to hunt down the fleeing survivors. Tarleton never dreamt that Daniel Morgan was planning to fight to the finish.

7

While Tarleton's troops spent most of the night marching along the twisting, dipping Green River Road, Daniel Morgan's men had been resting at Cowpens and listening to their general's battle plan. First Morgan outlined it for his officers, then he went from campfire to campfire explaining it to his men.

The plan was based on the terrain at Cowpens and on the knowledge of Tarleton's battle tactics that Morgan had from such friends as Richard Winn. Morgan probably told his men what he repeated in later years—he expected nothing from Tarleton but “downright fighting.” The young Englishman was going to come straight at them in an all-out charge.

To repel that charge, Morgan adopted tactics he had himself helped design at Saratoga. There was a similarity between the little army he commanded at Cowpens and the men he led in northern New York. Like his old rifle corps, his militia were crack shots. But they could not stand up against a British bayonet charge. It took too long to load and fire a rifle, and it was not equipped with a

bayonet.

He had complete confidence in his Continentals. No regiment in the British army had a prouder tradition than these men from Maryland and Delaware. They and their comrades in arms had demonstrated their heroism on a dozen battlefields. Above all, Morgan trusted their commander, Lt. Col. John Eager Howard of Maryland. At the battle of Germantown in 1777, he had led his 4th Maryland Regiment in a headlong charge that drove the British light infantry in panicky flight from their battle line back to their tents. After the American defeat at Camden, Howard had rounded up the survivors of his own and other regiments and led them on a three-day march to Charlotte through swamps and forests to elude British pursuit. Someone asked what they had to eat during that time. "Some peaches," Howard said.



An American canteen of the type used by militia at Cowpens.

Morgan was equally sure of the steadiness of the ex-Continentals who made up the bulk of his two companies of Virginia six-months militiamen. He told them that he was going to station them on either side of the Maryland and Delaware regulars, on the first crest of the almost invisibly rising slope that constituted Cowpens. A professional soldier would consider this the "military crest" because it was the high ground from which the best defense could be made. Behind this crest, the land sloped off to a slight hollow, and then rose to another slightly higher hump of earth, which was the geographical crest of the battleground. Here Morgan planned to post William Washington and his 80 dragoons. To make them more of a match for Tarleton's 300 horsemen, he called for volunteers to serve with Washington. About 40 men stepped forward, led by Andrew Pickens' friend, James McCall. Morgan gave them sabers and told them to obey Washington's orders.

There was nothing unusual or brilliant about this part of Morgan's battle plan. It was simply good sense and good tactics to select the most advantageous ground for his infantry and keep Washington's cavalry out of the immediate reach of Tarleton's far more numerous horsemen. It was in his plan for the militia that Morgan demonstrated his genius. At Camden, Horatio Gates had tried to use the militia as if they were regulars, positioning them in his battle line side by side with the Continentals. They swiftly demonstrated that they could not withstand a British bayonet charge.

Morgan decided that he would use his militia in a different way. He put the backwoodsmen under the command of Andrew Pickens and carefully explained what he wanted them to do. They were going to form a line about 150 yards ahead of Howard and the Continentals. They were to hold their fire until the British were within “killing distance.” They were to get off two or three shots and retreat behind the Continentals, who would carry on the battle while the militiamen re-formed and came back into the fight on the British flanks.

A select group of riflemen, considered the best shots in the army, were to advance another hundred yards on both sides of the Green River Road and begin skirmishing with the British as soon as they appeared. This was the tactic Sumter had used at Blackstocks to tempt Tarleton into a reckless charge, and it had cost the British heavy casualties.

His plan complete, Morgan did not retire to his tent, in the style of more autocratic generals, and await the moment of battle. He understood the importance of personal leadership. Above all, he knew how to talk to the militia. He was a man of the frontier, like them. Although he was crippled from his sciatica, he limped from group to group while they cooked their suppers and smoked their pipes, telling them how sure he was that they could whip “Benny.” Sixteen-year-old Thomas Young was among the cavalry volunteers. He remembered how Morgan helped them to fix their sabers, joked with them about their sweethearts, told them to keep up their courage and victory was certain.

“Long after I laid down,” Young recalled, “he was going among the soldiers encouraging them and telling them that the ‘Old Wagoner’ would crack his whip over Ben in the morning, as sure as they lived.”

“Just hold up your heads, boys, give them three fires, and you will be free,” Morgan told them. “Then when you return to your homes, how the old folks will bless you, and the girls will kiss you.” “I don’t believe that he slept a wink that night,” Young said later.

Many of these young militiamen had something else to motivate them—a fierce resentment of the way the British and loyalists had abused, and in some cases killed, their friends and relatives. Thomas Young’s brother, John, had been shot down in the spring of 1780 when loyalist militia attacked the Youngs’ regiment. “I do not believe I had ever used an oath before that day,” Young said. “But then I tore open my bosom and swore that I would never rest until I had avenged his

... were opening my coffin and swore that I would never rest until I had avenged his death.”



A powder horn and linstock like these were essential tools for artillerymen. They primed the cannon by pouring powder into a vent leading to the charge and fired it by touching the burning hemp on the tip of the linstock to the vent. The gunners serving the two 3-pounder “grasshoppers” at Cowpens used such equipment.

Another South Carolinian, 17-year-old James Collins, had fought with Sumter and other militia leaders since the fall of Charleston. He remembered with particular anger the swath of desolation left by loyalists when they plundered rebel Americans on the east side of the Broad. “Women were insulted and stripped of every article of decent clothing they might have on and every article of bedding, clothing or furniture was taken—knives, forks, dishes, spoons. Not a piece of meat or a pint of salt was left. They even entered houses where men lay sick of the smallpox ... dragged them out of their sick beds into the yard and put them to death in cold blood in the presence of their wives and children. We were too weak to repel them....”

Morgan’s Army

On paper Morgan’s army was inferior. The British numbered some 1100, all regulars and most of them tested in battle. Morgan had at best a little over 800 troops, and half of them were militia. Numbers, though, deceive, for Morgan’s army was in fact a first-rate detachment of light infantry, needing only leadership to win victories.

The core of Morgan’s army was a mixed brigade of Maryland and Delaware Continentals under Col. John Eager Howard, about 320 men. They were supported by 80 or so Continental dragoons under Col. William Washington.



Maryland Continental • Dragoon, 3rd Continentals

These Continentals were tough and experienced. Morgan’s militia were better material than the green troops who folded at Camden and

were better material than the green troops who joined at Camden and later ran away at Guilford. Some 200 were ex-Continentalists from Virginia. Morgan thought enough of them to employ them in the main battle line. The other militia were recruited by that wily partisan leader, Andrew Pickens, and William Davidson, a superb militia general. It's unlikely that such able commanders would have filled their ranks with the wavering and shiftless.

Morgan knew the worth of these troops and deployed them in a way that made the most of their strengths and minimized their weakness. They rewarded him with a victory still marveled at two centuries later.

These figures represent the units in Morgan's command.



Virginia militiaman • Carolina militiaman

Collins and his friends had joined Sumter, only to encounter Tarleton at Fishing Creek. "It was a perfect rout and an indiscriminate slaughter," he recalled. Retreating to the west, Collins described how they lived before Morgan and his regulars arrived to confront the British and loyalists. "We kept a flying camp, never staying long in one place, never camping near a public road ... never stripping off saddles." When they ate, "each one sat down with his sword by his side, his gun lying across his lap or under the seat on which he sat." It soon became necessary "for their safety," Collins said, to join Morgan. At Cowpens, men like James Collins were fighting for their lives.

Equally desperate—and angry—were men like Joseph Hughes, whose father had been killed by the loyalists. Hughes had been living as an "out-lier," hiding in the woods near his home with a number of other men who remained loyal to militia colonel Thomas Brandon. One day he ventured out to visit his family. As he approached the house, three loyalists sprang out of the door with leveled guns, shouting: "You damned Rebel, you are our prisoner!" Hughes wheeled his horse and leaped the gate to escape the hail of bullets.

At Cowpens, Hughes, though still in his teens, was given command of a company of militia. Probably by his side was his close friend, William Kennedy, considered one of the best shots in South Carolina. His prowess with the rifle had discouraged loyalists from venturing into the rebel settlement at Fairforest

Shoals. His gun had a peculiar *crack* which his friends recognized. When they heard it, they often said: “There is another Tory less.”

The men who had turned out to fight for Andrew Pickens had no illusions about what would happen to them if they were captured. Like their leader, they were violators of their paroles, liable to instant execution if captured. On the night of the 16th, Cornwallis, in his camp at Turkey Creek on the other side of the Broad, demonstrated what else would happen to their families. He wrote out an order for Cruger at Ninety Six. “If Colonel Pickens has left any Negroes, cattle or other property that may be useful ... I would have it seized accordingly and I desire that his houses may be burned and his plantations as far as lies in your power totally destroyed and himself if ever taken instantly hanged.” The order was executed the moment it was received at Ninety Six. Rebecca Pickens and her children were hurried into the January cold to watch their house, barns, and other outbuildings become bonfires.

The 200 Georgians and South Carolinians in Morgan’s army were all veterans of numerous battles, most of them fought under Elijah Clarke’s command. With their leader wounded, they were now commanded by James Jackson and John Cunningham. Morgan had largely relied on Jackson to rally them. Like most of Morgan’s men, he was young, only 23. He had fought Tarleton at Blackstocks, where he had ducked bullets to seize the guns of dead British to continue the fight after his men ran out of ammunition. In one respect, Jackson was unusual. He had been born in England. He arrived in America in 1774 and seems to have become an instant Georgian, right down to extreme pugnacity and a prickly sense of honor. He had recently quarreled with the rebel lieutenant governor of Georgia, challenged him to a duel, and killed him. Morgan appointed Jackson brigade major of the militia, making him Pickens’ second in command.

At least as formidable as Jackson’s veterans were the 140 North Carolinians under Maj. Joseph McDowell. They had fought at Musgrove’s Mill and in other battles in the summer of 1780 and had scrambled up the slopes of Kings Mountain to help destroy the loyalist army entrenched there.

Well before dawn, Morgan sent cavalry under a Georgian, Joshua Inman, to reconnoiter the Green River Road. They bumped into Tarleton’s advance guard and hastily retreated. Into the Cowpens they pounded to shout the alarm.

Morgan seemed to be everywhere on his horse, rousing the men. “Boys, get up,

Benny is coming,” he shouted. Quickly militia and Continentals got on their feet and bolted down cold hominy they had cooked the night before. Morgan ordered the baggage wagons to depart immediately to a safe place, about a mile in the rear. The militiamen’s horses were tied to trees, under a guard, closer to the rear of the battle line.

Morgan rode down to the picked riflemen who were going to open the fight and told them he had heard a lot of tall tales about who were the better shots, the men of Georgia or Carolina. Here was the chance to settle the matter and save their country in the bargain. “Let me see which are most entitled to the credit of brave men, the boys of Carolina or those of Georgia,” he roared. By positioning Georgians on the left of the road and Carolinians on the right, Morgan shrewdly arranged to make his competition highly visible.

To Pickens’ men Morgan made a full-fledged speech, reminding them of what the British had already done to their friends and many of their families. He pounded his fist in his hand and told them that this was their moment of revenge. He also praised the courage with which they had fought the British in earlier skirmishes, without the help of regulars or cavalry. Here they had the support of veterans in both departments. He had not the slightest doubt of victory if they obeyed their orders and fought like men. He told them his experiences with his rifle regiment at Saratoga and other battles, where they had beaten the flower of the British army, generals far more distinguished than Benny Tarleton and regiments far more famous than the units Tarleton was leading.

To his Continentals, Morgan made an even more emotional speech. He called them “my friends in arms, my dear boys,” and asked them to remember Saratoga, Monmouth, Paoli, Brandywine. “This day,” he said, “you must play your parts for honor and liberty’s cause.” He restated his battle plan, reminding them that after two or three rounds the militia would retreat under orders. They would not be running away. They would be falling back to regroup and harry the enemy’s flanks.

A Delaware soldier watching Morgan’s performance said that by the time he was through, there was not a man in the army who was not “in good spirits and very willing to fight.”

The blood-red rising sun crept above the hills along the slopes of Thicketty Mountain to the east. The men stamped their feet and blew on their hands to keep warm. It was cold, but the air was crisp and clear. The mighty ramparts of

the Blue Ridge were visible, 30 miles away. Much too distant for a refuge now, even if the swollen Broad River did not lie between them and Morgan's men.

Suddenly the British army was emerging from the woods along the Green River Road. The green-coated dragoons at their head slowed and then stopped. So did the red-coated light infantry behind them. An officer in a green coat rode to the head of the column and studied the American position. Everyone in the rebel army recognized him. It was Banastre Tarleton.

8

Tarleton soon found his position at the head of the column was hazardous. The Georgia and Carolina riflemen drifted toward him through the trees on either side of the road. *Pop pop* went their rifles. Bullets whistled close to Tarleton's head. He turned to the 50 British Legion dragoons commanded by Captain Ogilvie and ordered them to "drive in" the skirmishers. With a shout the dragoons charged. The riflemen rested their weapons against convenient trees and took steady aim. Again the long barrels blazed. Dragoons cried out and pitched from their saddles, horses screamed in pain. The riflemen flitted back through the open woods, reloading as they ran, a trick that continually amazed the British. Some whirled and fired again, and more dragoons crashed to earth. In a minute or two the riflemen were safely within the ranks of Pickens' militia. The dragoons recoiled from this array of fire power and cantered back toward the British commander. They had lost 15 out of their 50 men.

Tarleton meanwhile continued studying the rebel army. At a distance of about 400 yards he was able to identify Pickens' line of militia, whose numbers he guessed to be about a thousand. He estimated the Continentals and Virginia six-month militia in the second line at about 800. Washington's cavalry on the crest behind the Continentals he put at 120, his only accurate figure.



Few officers saw more combat than William Washington, a distant cousin of George. He was a veteran of many battles—among them Long Island and Trenton in 1776, Charleston in 1780, and Cowpens, Guilford, Hobkirks Hill, and Eutaw Springs in 1781—and numerous skirmishes. Thrice he was wounded, the last time at Eutaw Springs, where he was captured. His fellow cavalryman, 'Light-Horse Harry' Lee described him as of "a stout frame, being six feet in

neight, broad, strong, and corpulent ... in temper ne was good-natured.... BOLD, collected, and persevering, he preferred the heat of action to the collection and sifting of intelligence, to the calculations and combinations of means and measures....”



The British carried at least two flags into battle: the King’s standard and the colors of the 7th Fusiliers (below). Both were captured by Morgan’s troops.



Tarleton was not in the least intimidated by these odds, even though his estimates doubled Morgan’s actual strength. He was supremely confident that his regular infantry could sweep the riflemen and militia off the field, leaving only the outnumbered Continentals and cavalry. The ground looked level enough to repeat the Waxhaws rout. In his self-confidence and growing battle fever, he did not even bother to confer on a tactical plan with Newmarsh of the Fusiliers or McArthur of the Highlanders. He simply issued them orders to form a line of battle. The infantry was told to drop their heavy packs and blanket rolls. The light infantry companies were ordered to file to the right, until they extended as far as the flank of the militia facing them. The Legion infantry was ordered into line beside them. Next came a squad of blue-coated artillerymen with their brass grasshopper. They unpacked their gun and ammunition boxes and mounted them on the wheeled carriage with professional speed. In the Royal Artillery school at Woolrich the men who designed the gun estimated this task should take no more than two minutes.

The light infantry and Legion infantry were now told to advance a hundred yards, while the Fusiliers moved into line on their left. The other grasshopper was placed on the right of this regiment, no doubt to bolster the courage of the raw recruits. The two guns began hurling shot into the woods, firing at the riflemen who were filtering back to potshot the tempting red and green targets.

On each flank, Tarleton posted a captain and 50 dragoons, more than enough, he thought, to protect his infantry from a cavalry charge.

Tarleton ordered the Highlanders to form a line about 150 yards in the rear of the Fusiliers, slightly to their left. These veteran Scots and 200 Legion cavalry were his reserve, to be committed to the fight when they were most needed.

Everywhere Tarleton looked, he later recalled, he saw “the most promising assurance of success.” The officers and men were full of fire and vigor. Every order had been obeyed with alacrity. There was not a sign of weariness, though his men had marched half the night. They had been chasing these Americans for two weary weeks. They knew that if they beat them here, the war in South Carolina would be over. To make this a certainty, Banastre Tarleton issued a cruel order. They were to give no quarter, take no prisoners.



The only reasonably sure patriot flag on the field was a damask color, cut from the back of a chair, that Washington’s dragoons carried. The original, which measures only 18 inches by 18, is in the collection of the Washington Light Infantry Corps of Charleston.

The order might have made some gruesome sense as far as the militia was concerned. Almost every one of them was considered a criminal, fighting in direct violation of the law as laid down by His Majesty’s officers in numerous proclamations. Killing them would save the trouble of hanging them. But to order his men to give no quarter to Morgan’s Continentals was a blatant violation of the rules of war under which both sides had fought for the past five years. It was graphic glimpse of the rage which continued American resistance was igniting in Englishmen like Banastre Tarleton.

One British officer in the battle later said that Major Newmarsh was still posting the officers of the Fusiliers, the last regiment into line, when Tarleton ordered the advance to begin. With a tremendous shout, the green- and red-coated line surged forward.

From the top of the slope, Morgan called on his men to reply. “They give us the British haloo, boys,” he cried. “Give them the Indian haloo.” A howl of defiance leaped from 800 American throats. Simultaneously, the Georgians and North Carolinians opened fire behind the big trees. Some of the new recruits of the Fusiliers regiment revealed their nervousness by firing back. Their officers quickly halted this tactical violation. British infantry fired by the volley, and the riflemen were out of musket range anyway. Rifles outshot muskets by 150 yards.

Morgan watched the riflemen give the British infantry “a heavy and galling fire” as they advanced. But the sharpshooters made no pretense of holding their ground. Morgan had ordered them to fall back to Pickens’ militia and join them

for serious fighting. On the British came, their battle drums booming, their fifes shrilling, the two brass cannon barking. The artillerymen apparently did not consider the militiamen an important target. They blasted at the Continentals on the crest. Most of their rounds whizzed over the heads of the infantry and came dangerously close to Colonel Washington and his horsemen. He led his men to a safer position on the slope of the geographical crest, behind the left wing of the main American line.

Andrew Pickens and his fellow colonels, all on horseback, urged the militia to hold their fire, to aim low and pick out “the epaulette men”—the British officers with gold braid on their shoulders.

Tarleton’s Order of Battle

Legion dragoons (two troops)

Light infantry companies of the 16th, 71st, and Prince of Wales regiments

Legion infantry

7th Fusiliers

Royal artillery

71st Highlander regulars

17th Light Dragoons

Legion dragoons

This is the order in which Tarleton deployed his units on the battlefield.

It was no easy task to persuade these men not to fire while those 16-inch British bayonets bore down on them, glistening wickedly in the rising sun. The closer they got, the more difficult it would be to reload their clumsy muskets and get off another shot before the British were on top of them. But the musket was a grossly inaccurate weapon at anything more than 50 yards. This was the “killing distance” for which Pickens and Morgan wanted the men to wait. The steady fire of the grasshoppers, expertly served by the British artillerymen, made the wait even more harrowing.

Then came the moment of death. “Fire,” snarled Andrew Pickens. “Fire,” echoed his colonels up and down the line. The militia muskets and rifles belched flame and smoke. The British line recoiled as bullets from over 300 guns hurtled among them. Everywhere officers, easily visible at the heads of their companies, went down. It was probably here that Newmarsh of the Fusiliers, who had been so pessimistic about fighting under Tarleton, fell with a painful wound. But confidence in their favorite weapon, the bayonet, and the knowledge that they

were confronting militia quickly overcame the shock of this first blow. The red and green line surged forward again.

Thomas Young, sitting on his horse among Washington's cavalry, later recalled the noise of the battle. "At first it was *pop pop pop* (the sound of the rifles) and then a whole volley," he said. Then the regulars fired a volley. "It seemed like one sheet of flame from right to left," Young said.

The British were not trained to aim and fire. Their volley firing was designed to intimidate more than to kill. It made a tremendous noise and threw a cloud of white smoke over the battlefield. Most of the musket balls flew high over the heads of the Americans. Decades later, visitors to Cowpens found bullets embedded in tree trunks as high as 30 feet from the ground.

Out of the smoke the regulars came, bayonets leveled. James Collins was among the militiamen who decided that the two shots requested by Morgan was more than they could manage. "We gave the enemy one fire," he recalled. "When they charged us with their bayonets we gave way and retreated for our horses."

Most of the militia hurried around Morgan's left flank, following Pickens and his men. A lesser number may have found the right flank more convenient. The important thing, as far as they were concerned, was to escape those bayonets and reach the position where Morgan promised them they would be protected by Howard's Continentals and Washington's cavalry. Watching from the military crest, Sgt. William Seymour of the Delaware Continentals thought the militia retreated "in very good order, not seeming to be in the least confused." Thus far, Morgan's plan was working smoothly.

Tarleton ordered the 50 dragoons on his right flank to pursue Pickens and the bulk of the militia. If, as he later claimed, the British commander had seen William Washington and his 120 cavalry at the beginning of the battle, this order was a blunder. With 200 cavalymen in reserve, waiting a summons to attack, Tarleton sent 50 horsemen to face twice their number of mounted Americans. He may have assumed that Morgan was using standard battle tactics and regarded Washington's cavalry as his reserve, which he would not commit until necessity required it. The British commander never dreamt that the Old Wagoner had made a solemn promise to the militiamen that he would protect them from the fearsome green dragoons at all costs.

As the militia retreated, Tarleton's cavalry thundered down on them, their deadly

sabers raised. “Now,” thought James Collins, “my hide is in the loft.” A wild melee ensued, with the militiamen dodging behind trees, parrying the slashing sabers with their gun barrels. “They began to make a few hacks at some,” Collins said, “thinking they would have another Fishing Creek frolic.” As the militiamen dodged the swinging sabers, the British dragoons lost all semblance of a military formation and became “pretty much scattered,” Collins said.

At that moment, “Col. Washington’s cavalry was among them like a whirlwind,” Collins exultantly recalled. American sabers sent dragoons keeling from their horses. “The shock was so sudden and violent, they could not stand it, and immediately betook themselves to flight.” Collins said. “They appeared to be as hard to stop as a drove of wild Choctaw steers, going to Pennsylvania market.” Washington’s cavalry hotly pursued them and “in a few minutes the clashing of swords was out of hearing and quickly out of sight.”

Thomas Young was one of the South Carolina volunteers in this ferocious charge. He was riding a “little tackey”—a very inferior horse—which put him at a disadvantage. When he saw one of the British dragoons topple from his saddle, he executed “the quickest swap I ever made in my life” and leaped onto “the finest horse I ever rode.” Young said the American charge carried them through the 50 dragoons, whereupon they wheeled and attacked them in the rear. On his new steed he joined Washington’s pursuit of the fleeing British.

In spite of William Washington’s victorious strike, many militiamen decided that Cowpens was unsafe and leaped on their horses and departed. Among the officers who took prompt action to prevent further panic was young Joseph Hughes. Although blood streamed from a saber cut on his right hand, he drew his sword and raced after his fleeing company. Outrunning them, he whirled and flailed at them with the flat of his blade, roaring. “You damned cowards, halt and fight—there is more danger in running than in fighting.”

Andrew Pickens rode among other sprinters, shouting. “Are you going to leave your mothers, sisters, sweethearts and wives to such unmerciful scoundrels, such a horde of thieves?”

On the battlefield, volley after volley of musketry thundered, cannon boomed. The Continentals and the British regulars were slugging it out. Daniel Morgan rode up to the milling militiamen, waving his sword and roaring in a voice that outdid the musketry: “Form, form, my brave fellows. Give them one more fire and the day is ours. Old Morgan was never beaten.”

and the day is ours. Old Morgan was never beaten.

Would they fight or run? For a few agonizing moments, the outcome of the battle teetered on the response of these young backwoodsmen.

9

On the other side of the crest behind which Morgan and Pickens struggled to rally the militia, Banastre Tarleton was absorbed in pressing home the attack with his infantry. He seems to have paid no attention to the rout of his cavalry on the right. Nor did any of his junior officers in the Legion attempt to support the fleeing dragoons with reinforcements from the 200-man cavalry reserve. At this point in the battle, Tarleton badly needed a second in command who had the confidence to make on-the-spot decisions. One man cannot be everywhere on a battlefield. Unfortunately for Tarleton, Maj. George Hanger, his second in command, was in a hospital in Camden, slowly recovering from yellow fever.

With the militia out of the way, the British infantry had advanced on the Continentals and begun blasting volleys of musketry at them. The Continentals volleyed back. Smoke enveloped the battlefield. Tarleton later claimed the fire produced “much slaughter,” but it is doubtful that either side could see what they were shooting at after the first few rounds. The British continued to fire high, hitting few Continentals.

To Tarleton, the contest seemed “equally balanced,” and he judged it the moment to throw in his reserve. He ordered Major McArthur and his 71st Highlanders into the battle line to the left of the Fusiliers. This gave Tarleton over 700 infantrymen in action to the rebels’ 420. Simultaneously, Tarleton ordered the cavalry troop on the left to form a line and swing around the American right flank.

These orders, shouted above the thunder of musketry and the boom of the cannon, were promptly obeyed. On the crest of the hill, Howard saw the British threat developing. Once men are outflanked and begin to be hit with bullets from two sides, they are in danger of being routed. Howard ordered the Virginia militia on his right to “change their front” to meet this challenge. This standard battlefield tactic requires a company to wheel and face a flanking enemy.



An officer of the Maryland Regiment. He carries a spontoon, which is both a badge of office and in close combat a useful weapon.

A battlefield is a confusing place, and the Virginians, though mostly trained soldiers, were not regulars who had lived and drilled together over the previous months. Their captain shouted the order given him by Howard, and the men wheeled and began marching toward the rear. The Maryland and Delaware Continentals, seeing this strange departure, noting that it was done in perfect order and with deliberation, assumed that they had missed an order to fall back. They wheeled and followed the Virginians. On the opposite flank, the other company of Virginians repeated this performance. In 60 seconds the whole patriot line was retreating.

Behind the geographical crest of the hill, Morgan and Pickens had managed to steady and reorganize the militia. Morgan galloped back toward the military crest on which he assumed the Continentals were still fighting. He was thunderstruck to find them retreating. In a fury, he rode up to Howard and cried: “Are you beaten?”

Howard pointed to his unbroken ranks and told Morgan that soldiers who retreated in that kind of order were not beaten. Morgan agreed and told him to stay with the men and he would ride back and choose the place where the Continentals should turn and rally. The Old Wagoner spurred his horse ahead toward the geographical crest of the hill, about 50 paces behind their first line.

On the British side of the battlefield, the sight of the retreating Continentals revived hopes of an easy victory. Major McArthur of the 71st sought out Tarleton and urged him to order the cavalry reserve to charge and turn the retreat into a rout. Tarleton claimed that he sent this order to the cavalry, who were now at least 400 yards away from the vortex of the battle. Perhaps he did. It would very probably have been obeyed if it had arrived in time. The dragoons of the British Legion liked nothing so much as chopping up a retreating enemy.

But events now occurred with a rapidity that made it impossible for the cavalry to respond. The center of Tarleton’s line of infantry surged up the slope after the Continentals, bayonets lowered, howling for American blood. With almost half their officers dead or wounded by now, they lost all semblance of military formation.

Far down the battlefield, where he had halted his pursuit of the British cavalry, William Washington saw what was happening. He sent a horseman racing to Morgan with a terse message. "They are coming on like a mob. Give them another fire and I will charge them." Thomas Young, riding with Washington, never forgot the moment. "The bugle sounded," he said. "We made a half circuit at full speed and came upon the rear of the British line shouting and charging like madmen."

Simultaneously, Morgan reached the geographical crest of the slope, with the Continentals only a few steps behind him. He roared out an order to turn and fire. The Continentals wheeled and threw a blast of concentrated musketry into the faces of the charging British. Officers and men toppled. The line recoiled.

"Give them the bayonet," bellowed John Eager Howard.

With a wild yell, the Continentals charged. The astonished British panicked. Some of them, probably the Fusiliers, flung themselves faced down on the ground begging for mercy. Others, Thomas Young recalled, "took to the wagon road and did the prettiest sort of running away."

At almost the same moment, the Highlanders, whose weight, if they had joined the charge, would probably have been decisive, received an unexpected blast of musketry from their flank. Andrew Pickens and the militia had returned to the battle. The backwoodsmen blazed at the Scotsmen, the riflemen among them concentrating on the screen of the cavalymen. The cavalry fled and McArthur's men found themselves fighting a private war with the militia.

Astonished and appalled, Tarleton sent an officer racing to the British Legion cavalry with orders for them to form a line of battle about 400 yards away, on the left of the road. He rode frantically among his fleeing infantry, trying to rally them. His first purpose was "to protect the guns." To lose a cannon was a major disgrace in 18th-century warfare. The artillerymen were the only part of the British center that had not succumbed to the general panic. They continued to fire their grasshoppers, while the infantry threw down their muskets or ran past them helter skelter. Part of the artillery's tradition was an absolute refusal to surrender. They lived by the code of victory or death.

Once past the surrendering infantry, the Continentals headed for the cannon. Like robots—or very brave men—the artillerymen continued to fire until every man except one was shot down or bayoneted.

The last survivor of the other gun crew was the man who touched the match to the powder vent. A Continental called on him to surrender this tool. The artilleryman refused. As the Continental raised his bayonet to kill him, Howard came up and blocked the blow with his sword. A man that brave, the colonel said, deserved to live. The artilleryman surrendered the match to Howard.

Up and down the American line on the crest rang an ominous cry. "Give them Tarleton's quarter." Remembering Waxhaws, the regulars and their Virginia militia cousins were ready to massacre the surrendered British. But Daniel Morgan, the epitome of battle fury while the guns were firing, was a humane and generous man. He rode into the shouting infantrymen, ordering them to let the enemy live. Junior officers joined him in enforcing the order.

Discipline as well as mercy made the order advisable. The battle was not over. The Highlanders were still fighting fiercely against Pickens' men. Tarleton was riding frantically toward his Legion cavalry to bring them back into the battle. But the militia riflemen were back on the field and Tarleton was their prime target. Bullets whistled around him as he rode. Several hit his horse. The animal crashed to the ground. Tarleton sprang up, his saber ready. Dr. Robert Jackson, assistant surgeon of the 71st, galloped to the distraught lieutenant colonel and offered him his horse. Tarleton refused. For a moment he seemed ready to die on the chaotic battlefield with his men. Dr. Jackson urged him again. Springing off his horse, he told Tarleton, "Your safety is of the highest importance to the army."

Tarleton mounted Jackson's horse and rode to rally his troops. Fastening a white handkerchief to his cane, Jackson strolled toward the all-but-victorious Americans. No matter how the battle ended, he wanted to stay alive to tend the wounded.

Looking over his shoulder at the battlefield, Tarleton clung to a shred of hope. An all-out charge by the cavalry could still "retrieve the day," he said later. The Americans were "much broken by their rapid advance."

But the British Legion had no appetite for another encounter with the muskets of Andrew Pickens' militia. "All attempts to restore order, recollection [of past glory] or courage, proved fruitless," Tarleton said. No less than 200 Legion dragoons wheeled their horses and galloped for safety in the very teeth of Tarleton's harangue. Fourteen officers and 40 dragoons of the 17th Regiment

obeyed his summons and charged with him toward the all-but-disintegrated British battle line. Their chief hope was to save the cannon and rescue some small consolation from the defeat.

Stages of the Battle

Because the battle was a continuous flow of action from the opening skirmish to the pell-mell flight of the Legion dragoons at the end, the important maneuvers cannot all be shown on a single map. This sequence of maps diagrams the main stages of the battle.



1.

Skirmishers drive back Tarleton's cavalry, sent forward to examine the enemy's lines, and then withdraw into Pickens' line of militia. Without pausing, Tarleton forms his line of battle.

Green River Road
Route 11
Morgan's camp
Washington's cavalry
Visitor Center
Howard's Continentals
Pickens' militia
Skirmishers
17th dragoons
Legion dragoons
Tarleton's main line
71st Highlanders
Scruggs House



2.

The British advance on Pickens' militia, who deliver the promised two shots each and fall back on the flanks. When they are pursued by British dragoons, Washington's cavalry charges into action and drives them off.

Green River Road
Route 11
Morgan's camp
Washington's cavalry
Visitor Center
Howard's Continentals
Pickens' militia
17th dragoons
Tarleton's main line
Legion dragoons
71st Highlanders
Scruggs House



3.

Howard's Continentals rout the British in the center, supported by cavalry on the left and militia on the right.

Green River Road
Route 11
Morgan's camp
Howard's Continentals
Washington's cavalry
Visitor Center
Tarleton's main line
Pickens' militia
71st Highlanders
17th dragoons
Legion dragoons
Scruggs House

How to read these battle diagrams

British positions are shown in RED, American in BLUE. Open boxes show former positions, arrows movement. Clashes are shown by stars. Modern features, included for orientation, appear in gray.



This perspective by the artist Richard Schlecht compresses the whole battle into one view. The open woods in the foreground (A) is littered with British shot down by Pickens' skirmishers. At the far right (B) Washington's cavalry drive back the British dragoons pursuing Pickens' militia. Along the third line (C) Howard's Continentals repulse the attacking British regulars with volleys and bayonets. On Tarleton's left (D) the 71st is engaged in a hot contest with militia, some of whom had returned to the battle after firing their two shots and withdrawing. They hit Tarleton's left flank hard while Howard's troops rout the British in the center, giving Morgan the victory. A gem of tactical planning and maneuver, it was by far the patriot's best fought battle of the war.

The painting conveys a close sense of the original terrain with its scattered hardwoods and undulating ground that Morgan turned to good use. The axis of the battlefield, then as now, is the old Green River Road, which runs diagonally across the scene. The diverging road at left was not there at the time of the battle.

They never got there. Instead, they collided with William Washington's cavalry that had wheeled after their assault on the rear of the infantry and begun a pursuit of the scampering redcoats, calling on them to surrender, sabering those who refused. Washington shouted an order to meet the British charge. Most of his horsemen, absorbed in their pursuit of the infantry, did not hear him. Washington, leading the charge, did not realize he was almost unsupported. The burly Virginian, remembering his humiliating defeat at Lenuds Ferry in May 1780, had a personal score to settle with Banastre Tarleton. He headed straight for him.

Tarleton and two officers accepted Washington's challenge. The Virginian slashed at the first man, but his saber snapped at the hilt. As the officer stood up in his stirrups, his saber raised for a fatal stroke, Washington's bugler boy rode up and fired at the Englishman. The second officer was about to make a similar stroke when the sergeant-major of the 3d Continental Dragoons arrived to parry the blow and slash this assailant's sword arm. Tarleton made a final assault. Washington parried his blow with his broken sword. From his saddle holsters, Tarleton drew two pistols in swift succession and fired at Washington. One bullet wounded Washington's horse.

By this time Tarleton saw that the battle was totally lost. The riflemen were running toward his horsemen, and their bullets were again whistling close. The

Highlanders were being methodically surrounded by Pickens' militia and Morgan's Continentals. Summoning his gallant 54 supporters, Tarleton galloped down the Green River Road, a defeated man.

On the battlefield, the Highlanders were trying to retreat. But Howard's Continentals and Washington's cavalry were now between them and safety. Through the center of their line charged Lt. Col. James Jackson and some of his Georgians to try to seize their standard. Bayonet-wielding Scotsmen were about to kill Jackson when Howard and his Continentals broke through the 71st's flank and saved him. Howard called on the Highlanders to surrender. Major McArthur handed his sword to Pickens and so did most of the other officers. Pickens passed the major's sword to Jackson and ordered him to escort McArthur to the rear.

Captain Duncasson of the 71st surrendered his sword to Howard. When Howard remounted, the captain clung to his saddle and almost unhorsed him. "I expressed my displeasure," Howard recalled, "and asked him what he was about." Duncasson told Howard that Tarleton had issued orders to give no quarter and they did not expect any. The Continentals were approaching with their bayonets still fixed. He was afraid of what they might do to him. Howard ordered a sergeant to protect the captain.

Around the patriots main position, a happy chaos raged. In his exultation, Morgan picked up his 9-year-old drummer boy and kissed him on both cheeks.

Others were off on new adventures. Cavalryman Thomas Young joined half a dozen riders in pursuit of prisoners and loot down the Green River Road. They must have embarked on this foray shortly after most of Tarleton's cavalry had deserted him and before Tarleton himself quit the battlefield after the encounter with Washington.

"We went about twelve miles," Young said in his recollections of the battle, "and captured two British soldiers, two negroes and two horses laden with portmanteaus. One of the portmanteaus belonged to a paymaster ... and contained gold." The other riders decided this haul was too good to risk on the road and told Young to escort the prisoners and the money back to Cowpens. Young had ridden several miles when he collided with Tarleton and his 54 troopers. Abandoning his captures, Young tried to escape. He darted down a side road, but his horse was so stiff from the hard exercise on the battlefield, the British overtook him

“My pistol was empty so I drew my sword and made battle,” the young militiaman said. “I never fought so hard in my life.” He was hopelessly outnumbered. In a few clanging seconds, a saber split a finger on his left hand, another slashed his sword arm, a third blade raked his forehead and the skin fell over his eyes, blinding him. A saber tip speared his left shoulder, a blade sank deep into his right shoulder, and a final blow caught him on the back of the head. Young clung to his horse’s neck, half conscious.

Washington and Tarleton Duel

One of the battle’s most colorful incidents occurred at the very end. As defeat enveloped his army, Tarleton tried to rally his cavalry to the support of the infantry. His Legion dragoons, ignoring his orders and threats, stampeded off the field. Only the disciplined veterans of the 17th Dragoons followed him into battle. They ran head-on into the Continental dragoons of Lt. Col. William Washington. As sabers flashed, Washington found himself far in advance of his unit. What happened next is described in a passage from John Marshall’s famous *Life of George Washington*, written when the event still lingered in the memory of contemporaries: “Observing [Washington about 30 yards in front of his regiment], three British officers wheeled about and attacked him; the officer on his left was aiming to cut him down, when a sergeant came up and intercepted the blow by disabling the sword-arm, at the same instant the officer on his right was about to make a stroke at him, when a waiter, too small to wield a sword, saved him by wounding the officer with a pistol. At this moment, Tarleton made a thrust at him, which he parried, upon which the officer [Tarleton] retreated a few paces and discharged his pistol at him....”

It is this account that probably inspired the artist William Ranney in 1845 to paint the vigorous battle scene spread across these pages. Washington and Tarleton (on the black horse) raise their swords in the center while Washington’s servant boy levels his pistol at the far dragoon. While the painting errs in details of costume—Washington and his sergeant should be dressed in white coats, not green, and the British should be in green, not red—it catches the spirit of the duel.

He was battered and bleeding, but his courage saved his life. With the peculiar sportsmanship that the British bring to war, they took him off his horse, bandaged his wounds, and led him back to the main road, where they rejoined Tarleton and the rest of his party. One of the Tory guides that had led the British through the back country to Cowpens recognized Young and announced he was going to kill him. He cocked his weapon. “In a moment,” Young said, “about twenty British soldiers drew their swords, cursed him for a coward wishing to kill a boy without arms and a prisoner, and ran him off.”

Tarleton ordered Young to ride beside him. He asked him many questions about Morgan’s army. He was particularly interested in how many dragoons Washington had. “He had seventy,” Young said, “and two volunteer companies of mounted militia. But you know, they [the militia] won’t fight.”

“They did today,” Tarleton replied.

10

On the battlefield at Cowpens, Surgeons Robert Jackson of the 71st Highlanders and Richard Pindell of the 1st Maryland were doing their limited best to help the wounded of both sides. There were 62 patriots and 200 British in need of medical attention, which consisted largely of extracting musket balls, if possible, bandaging wounds, and giving sufferers some opium or whiskey, if any was available. The battle had also cost the British 110 dead, including 10 officers. Only 12 patriots were killed in the battle, though many more died later of wounds. But it was the number of prisoners—some 530—that underscored the totality of the American victory.

Even as prisoners, the British, particularly the Scots, somewhat awed the Americans. Joseph McJunkin said they “looked like nabobs in their flaming regimentals as they sat down with us, the militia, in our tattered hunting shirts, black-smoked and greasy.”

Other patriots were not content to inspect their exotic captives. William Washington was having a terse conference with Andrew Pickens. They agreed that there was still a good chance to catch Tarleton. But they needed enough men to overwhelm his 54-man squadron. Washington changed his wounded horse for

a healthy mount and rounded up his scattered dragoons. Pickens summoned some of his own men and ordered James Jackson to follow him “with as many of the mounted militia as he could get.”



Among the equipment captured from the British was a “Travelling Forge,” used by artificers to keep horses shod and wagons in repair.

Down the Green River Road they galloped, sabers in hand. But Tarleton the cavalryman was not an easy man to catch. He rode at his usual horse-killing pace. A few miles above William Thompson’s plantation on Thicketty Creek, they found the expedition’s baggage wagons abandoned, 35 in all, most of them belonging to the 7th Regiment. The fleeing cavalry of the Legion had told the 100-man guard of the defeat. The officer in command had set fire to all the baggage that would burn, cut loose the wagon horses, mounted his infantry two to a horse, and ridden for the safety of Cornwallis’s army. Abandoned with the baggage were some 70 black slaves. A short time later, a party of loyalists, fugitives from the battlefield, reached the baggage train and began to loot it. They were not long at this work before Tarleton and his heartsick officers and troopers came pounding down the road. They did not ask questions about loyalty. They cut down the looters without mercy.

Tarleton too was riding for Cornwallis’s camp, but he had more than safety on his mind. He assumed the British commander was just across the Broad River at Kings Mountain in a position to rescue the 500 or so men Morgan had taken prisoner. Perhaps Tarleton met a loyalist scout or messenger somewhere along the road. At any rate, he heard “with infinite grief and astonishment” that the main army was at least 35 miles away, at Turkey Creek.

This news meant a change of route. The British decided they needed a guide. Near Thicketty Creek they stopped at the house of a man named Goude-lock. He was known as a rebel. But Tarleton probably put a saber to his throat and told him he would be a dead man if he did not lead them to Hamiltons Ford across the Broad River, near the mouth of Bullocks Creek. Goude-lock’s terrified wife watched this virtual kidnapping of her husband.

About half an hour after Tarleton and his troopers departed to the southeast, Washington, Pickens, and their dragoons and militia troopers rode into Goude-lock’s yard. They had stopped to extinguish the fires the British started in

the baggage wagons and collect some of the slaves the enemy had abandoned. The Americans asked Mrs. Goudelock if she had seen the British fugitives. Yes, she said. What road did they take? She pointed down the Green River Road, which led to Grindal Shoals on the Pacolet. Like a great many people in every war, she was more interested in personal survival than national victory. If the Americans caught up to Tarleton, there was certain to be a bloody struggle, in which her husband might be killed. Mrs. Goudelock preferred a live husband to a dead or captured British commander.



Congress awarded this silver sword to Colonel Pickens for his part in the battle.

The Americans galloped for the Pacolet. Not until they had traveled 24 miles on this cold trail did they turn back. By then, it was much too late. Tarleton was safely across the Broad River at Hamiltons Ford. But the American pursuit helped save Thomas Young, the captured militiaman. When Tarleton and his men, guided by the reluctant Goudelock, reached the ford, it was almost dark. Someone told them the river was “swimming.” Someone else, perhaps a loyalist scout, rode up with word that Washington and his cavalry were after them. Considerable confusion ensued, as Tarleton and his officers conferred on whether to flee down the river to some other ford, attempt to swim the river in the dark, or stand and fight. Everyone stopped thinking about Thomas Young and another prisoner, a Virginian whom the British had scooped up along the road. The two Americans spurred their horses into the darkness, and no one noticed they were gone.

Tarleton crossed the Broad River that night and spent the next morning collecting his runaway dragoons and other stragglers before riding down to Cornwallis’s camp at Turkey Creek. The British commander already knew the bad news. Some of the Legion cavalry had drifted into camp the previous night. But Tarleton, as the field commander, was required to make a detailed report.

According to Joseph McJunkin, whose father had been taken prisoner by the British and was an eyewitness, Cornwallis grew so agitated he plunged his sword into the ground in front of his tent and leaned on it while listening to the details of the disaster. By the end of Tarleton’s account, the earl was leaning so hard on the hilt that the sword snapped in half. He threw the broken blade on the ground and swore he would recapture the lost light infantry, Fusiliers, and Highlanders.

The general exonerated Tarleton of all culpability for the defeat at Cowpens. “You have forfeited no part of my esteem, as an officer,” he assured Tarleton. Cornwallis blamed the loss on the “total misbehavior of the troops.” But he confided to Lord Rawdon, the commander at Camden, that “the late affair has almost broke my heart.”



Of the three medals awarded by Congress—a gold medal to Morgan and silver medals to Washington and Howard—only the Howard medal has survived. The Latin inscription reads: “The American Congress to John Eager Howard, commander of a regiment of infantry.” The medal is in the collection of the Maryland Historical Society.

On the same morning that Tarleton was making his doleful report, Washington and Pickens returned to Cowpens. On their ride back, they collected several dozen—some versions make it as many as 100—additional British soldiers straggling through the woods. At the battlefield they found only the two surgeons caring for the wounded and a handful of Pickens’ men guarding them. Daniel Morgan, knowing Cornwallis would make a determined effort to regain the prisoners, had crossed the Broad River on the afternoon of the battle and headed northwest toward Gilbert Town. Pickens and Washington caught up to him there, and Morgan gave Pickens charge of the prisoners, with orders to head for an upper ford of the Catawba River. Decoying Cornwallis, Morgan led his Continentals toward a lower ford of the same river. In an exhausting five-day march, often in an icy rain, both units got across this deep, swift-running stream ahead of the pursuing British. The prisoners were now beyond Cornwallis’s reach. They were soon marched to camps in Virginia, where the men Morgan helped capture at Saratoga were held.

This final retreat, a vital maneuver that consolidated the field victory at Cowpens, worsened Morgan’s sciatica. From the east bank of the Catawba, he warned Greene that he would have to leave the army. “I grow worse every hour,” he wrote. “I can’t ride or walk.” As the rain continued to pour down, Morgan had to abandon his tent and seek the warmth of a private house. Greene immediately rode from Cheraw Hills and took personal command of the army. By the time Morgan departed for Virginia on February 10, he was in such pain that he had to be carried in a litter.

A grateful Congress showered the Cowpens victors with praise and rewards. Morgan was voted a gold medal, and Howard and Washington were voted silver medals. Pickens received a silver sword. Perhaps the most immediate result of the battle was in the minds of the people of the South. The victory sent a wave of hope through the Carolinas and Georgia. It also changed attitudes in Congress toward the southern States. John Mathews of South Carolina told Greene that “the intelligence ... seems to have had a very sensible effect on *some folks*, for as this is a convincing proof that something is to be done in that department ... they seem at present to be well disposed to give it every possible aid.”

The news had an exhilarating effect on Greene’s half of the southern army. He ordered a celebration and praised Morgan extravagantly in the general orders announcing the victory. A friend on Greene’s staff sent a copy to Morgan, adding, “It was written immediately after we heard the news, and during the operation of some cherry bounce.” To Francis Marion, Greene wrote, “After this, nothing will appear difficult.”

This optimism soon faded. To the men in the field, Cowpens did not seem particularly decisive. Banastre Tarleton was soon back in action at the head of the British cavalry. On February 1, from his sick bed, Morgan wrote a despairing letter to Gov. Thomas Jefferson of Virginia, describing the retreat of the Southern army before Cornwallis. “Our men [are] almost naked,” still too weak to fight him. “Great God what is the reason we can’t have more men in the field? How distressing it must be to an anxious mind to see the country over run and destroyed for want of assistance.”

The civil war between the rebels and the loyalists continued in South Carolina, marked by the same savage fratricidal strife. “The scenes were awful,” Andrew Pickens recalled. Young James Collins, in his simple, honest way, told the militiaman’s side of this story. Summing up his role at Cowpens, Collins said he fired his “little rifle five times, whether with any effect or not, I do not know.” The following day, he and many other militiamen received “some small share of the plunder” from the captured British wagons. Then, “taking care to get as much powder as we could, we [the militia] disbanded and returned to our old haunts, where we obtained a few days rest.” Within a week, Collins was again on his horse, risking his life as a scout and messenger.

Only years later, with a full perspective of the war, did the importance of Cowpens become clear. By destroying Tarleton’s Legion, Daniel Morgan

crippled the enemy's power to intimidate and suppress the militia. Cornwallis was never able to replace the regulars he lost at Cowpens. He had to abandon all thought of dividing his field army—which meant that British power did not extend much beyond the perimeter of his camp. When he pursued Greene's army deep into North Carolina, the partisans in South Carolina rose in revolt. Eventually, Cornwallis was forced to unite his decimated, half-starved regiments with the British troops in Virginia, where they were trapped by Gen. George Washington's army at Yorktown in October 1781.

In South Carolina, meanwhile, Nathanael Greene combined militia with his small regular army in the style Morgan had originated at Cowpens. Though Greene was forced to retreat without victory at Guilford Courthouse (March 15, 1781), Hobkirks Hill (April 25, 1781), and Eutaw Springs (September 8, 1781), the British army suffered such heavy losses in these and other encounters that they soon abandoned all their posts in the back country, including the fort at Ninety Six, and retreated to a small enclave around Charleston. There they remained, impotent and besieged, until the war was almost over.

It took nine years for the U.S. Treasury to scrape together the cash to buy Daniel Morgan the gold medal voted him by Congress for Cowpens. In the spring of 1790, this letter came to the Old Wagoner at his home near Winchester, Virginia:

New York, March 25, 1790

Sir: You will receive with this a medal, struck by the order of the late Congress, in commemoration of your much approved conduct in the battle of the Cowpens and presented to you as a mark of the high sense which your country entertains of your services on that occasion.

This medal was put into my hands by Mr. Jefferson, and it is with singular pleasure that I now transmit it to you.

I am, Sir &c., George Washington

Part 2 Cowpens and the War in the South

A Guide to the Battlefield and Related Sites



On the 75th anniversary of the battle, the Washington Light Infantry—a Charleston militia company—marched to the battlefield and erected this monument to the victors.

Cowpens Battleground

Cowpens was one of the most skillfully fought battles in the annals of the American military. It pitted a young and ruthless commander of British dragoons—a man widely feared and hated in the South—against a brilliant tactician and experienced leader of American militia. The fighting was short and decisive. In less than an hour, three-fourths of the British were killed or captured, many of them the best light troops in the army. For Cornwallis, the rout was another in a series of disasters that led ultimately to final defeat at Yorktown.

The park that preserves the scene of this battle is located in upstate South Carolina, 11 miles northwest of Gaffney by way of S.C. 11. The original park on this site was established in 1929 on an acre of ground marking the point of some of the hardest fighting. For the bicentennial of the battle, the park was expanded to over 842 acres, and many new facilities—among them a visitor center, roads, trails, and waysides—were built.

The battlefield is small enough for visitors to stroll around and replay the maneuvers of the opposing commanders. A 1¼-mile trail loops through the heart of the park. Two of the first stops are at the lines held by Howard's Continentals and Pickens' militia. Farther along the trail you can stand where Tarleton formed his troops into a line of battle. From this point, the trail up the Green River Road covers ground over which the British advanced at sunrise that cold January morning. The pitched fighting between Continentals and redcoats that decided the contest occurred just beyond the bend in the road.

The land is currently being restored to its appearance at the time of the battle. In 1781, this field was a grassy meadow dotted with tall hardwoods. A locally known pasturing ground, it was used by Carolina farmers to fatten cattle before sending them to low-country markets.

Tarleton in his memoirs described it as an “open wood ... disadvantageous for the Americans, and convenient for the British.” He expected to break through the rebel lines, as he had so often done in the past, and ride down the fleeing remnants with his cavalry.

Morgan saw the same ground as favoring him and based his plan of battle on a shrewd appraisal of both his foe and his own men. He was happy enough that

there was no swamp nearby for his militia to flee to and unconcerned that there were no natural obstacles covering his wings from cavalry. He knew his adversary, he claimed, “and was perfectly sure I should have nothing but downright fighting. As to retreat, it was the very thing I wished to cut off all hope of.... When men are forced to fight, they will sell their lives dearly.” So Morgan deployed his men according to their abilities and handled them in battle with rare skill. They rewarded him, militia and regular alike, with what was probably the patriots’ best-fought battle of the war.

Cowpens was only one battle in a long campaign. For perspective, nine other sites of the War in the South are described on the following pages. Several of them are administered by public agencies; a few are barely marked and may be hard to find. Travelers will find two works useful: *Landmarks of the American Revolution* by Mark M. Boatner III (1975) and *The Bicentennial Guide to the American Revolution, Volume 3, The War in the South* by Sol Stember (1974).



This monument was erected by the government in 1932 to commemorate the battle. It originally stood in the center of Morgan’s third line but was moved to this location when the new visitor center was built for the Bicentennial.



These hardwoods along the patriots’ third line suggest the open woods that contemporaries agree covered the Cowpens at the time of the battle.



VIRGINIA

Appalachian National Scenic Trail

Blacksburg

Roanoke

Lynchburg

James River

To Yorktown and Colonial National Historical Park

Blue Ridge Parkway

NORTH CAROLINA

Danville

Winston-Salem

Guilford Courthouse National Military Park
Burlington
High Point
Greensboro
Durham
Chapel Hill
Raleigh
Hickory
Salisbury
Fayetteville
Moore's Creek National Battlefield
Kannapolis
Gastonia
Charlotte
Wilmington

SOUTH CAROLINA

Cowpens National Battlefield
Gaffney
Kings Mountain National Military Park
Spartanburg
Rock Hill
Waxhaws
Ninety Six National Historic Site
Camden Battlefield
Camden
Florence
Columbia
Eutaw Springs Historical Area
Charleston

GEORGIA

Augusta

The Road to Yorktown

Savannah 1778-79



The British opened their campaign against the South with the capture of this city

in late 1778. They went on to conquer Georgia and threaten the Carolinas. To retake the city, French and American infantry opened a siege in the fall of 1779. The British repulsed the allied attacks with great losses. Some of the hardest fighting swirled around Spring Hill Redoubt. Nothing remains of this earthwork. A plaque on Railroad Street is the only reminder of the battle.

Charleston 1780



The British laid siege to this city in spring 1780. Trapped inside was the entire Southern army, 5,000 troops under Gen. Benjamin Lincoln. When Lincoln surrendered, it was one of the most crushing defeats of the war for the Continentals. Only a few evidences of the war remain, among them a tabby wall (part of the patriots' defensive works) in Marion Square and a statue of William Pitt, damaged in the shelling, in a park in the lower city.

Waxhaws 1780



The only sizable force not trapped inside Charleston was a regiment of Continentals under Abraham Buford. Pursuing hard, Tarleton caught them on May 29, 1780, in a clearing. His dragoons and infantry swarmed over Buford's lines. The result was a slaughter. Many Continentals were killed trying to surrender. The massacre inspired the epithet "Bloody" Tarleton.

Site located 9 miles east of Lancaster, S.C., on Rt. 522. Marked by a monument and common grave.

Camden 1780



After the fall of Charleston, Congress sent Gates south to stop the British. On August 16 he collided with Cornwallis outside this village. The battle was another American disaster. The militia broke and ran, and the Continentals were overwhelmed. This defeat was the low point of the war in the South. Historic Camden preserves remnants of the Revolutionary town. The battlefield is several

miles north of town. This stone marks the place where the heroic DeKalb fell.

Kings Mountain 1780



When Cornwallis invaded North Carolina in autumn 1780, he sent Patrick Ferguson ranging into the upcountry. A band of “over-mountain” men—tired of his threats and depredations—trapped him and his American loyalists on this summit. In a savage battle on October 7, they killed or wounded a third of his men and captured the rest. The defeat was Cornwallis’s first setback in his campaign to conquer the South. Administered by NPS.

Guilford Courthouse 1781



Armies under Nathanael Greene and Cornwallis fought one of the decisive battles of the Revolutionary War here on March 15. In two hours of hard fighting, Cornwallis drove Greene from the field, but at such cost that he had to break off campaigning and fall back to the coast.

Located on the outskirts of Greensboro, N.C. Administered by the National Park Service.

Ninety Six 1781



Located on the main trading route to the Cherokees, this palisaded village was the most important British outpost in the South Carolina back country. Greene laid siege to the garrison here from May 22 to June 19, 1781, but could not subdue the post. A relief force raised the siege, which was soon evacuated and burned. The star fort and some buildings have been reconstructed.

Park administered by the National Park Service.

Eutaw Springs 1781



The last major battle in the lower South (September 8, 1781), Eutaw Springs matched Greene with 2,200 troops against 1,900 redcoats. The outcome was a draw. The British retreated to Charleston, and there they remained the rest of the war.

A memorial park stands on Rt. 6. just east of Eutawville, S.C. The original battlefield is under the waters of Lake Marion.

Yorktown 1781



Cornwallis's surrender at this little port town on October 19, 1781, brought the war to an effective end. The victory was a consequence of the Franco-American alliance. French ships blockaded the harbor and prevented resupply, while Washington's powerful force of Continentals and French regulars besieged the British by land. After a long bombardment and a night attack that captured two redoubts, Cornwallis asked for terms.

Administered by NPS.

For Further Reading

For those who wish to explore the story of Cowpens in more depth, the following books will be helpful. *Daniel Morgan, Revolutionary Rifleman* by Don Higgenbotham (1961) is a well-paced, solidly researched narrative of the Old Wagoner's adventurous life. Still valuable, especially for its wealth of quotations from Morgan's correspondence, is James Graham's *Life of General Morgan* (1856). On the struggle for the South Carolina back-country, *Ninety Six* by Robert D. Bass (1978) is the best modern study. Edward McCrady's two-volume work, *A History of South Carolina in the Revolution* (1901), is also useful. For personal anecdotes about the savage civil war between rebels and loyalists, *Traditions and Reminiscences, Chiefly of the American Revolution in the South* by Joseph Johnson, M.D. (1851) is a basic source book. Equally illuminating is James Collins' *Autobiography of a Revolutionary Soldier*, published in *Sixty Years in the Nueces Valley* (1930). Biographies of other men who participated in Cowpens are not numerous. *Skyagunsta* by A. L. Pickens (1934) mingles legend and fact about Andrew Pickens. *Piedmont Partisan* by Chalmers G. Davidson (1951) is a balanced account of William Lee Davidson. *James Jackson, Duelist and Militant Statesman* by William O. Foster (1960) is a competent study of the fiery Georgia leader. *The Life of Major General Nathanael Greene* by George Washington Greene (1871) gives the reader a look at the battle from the viewpoint of the American commander in the South. For the British side of the story, one of the best accounts is Banastre Tarleton's *A History of the Campaign of 1780 and 1781 in the Southern Provinces of North America* (1787), available in a reprint edition. *The Green Dragoon* by Robert D. Bass (1957) gives a more objective view of Tarleton's meteoric career. Two other useful books are *Strictures on Lt. Col. Tarleton's History* by Roderick Mackenzie (1788), an officer who fought at Cowpens with the 71st Regiment,

and *The History of the Origin, Progress and Termination of the American War* by Charles Stedman (1794), a British officer who was extremely critical of Tarleton. Both are available in reprint editions. *Cornwallis, the American Adventure* by Franklin and Mary Wickwire (1970) has an excellent account of Cowpens—and the whole war in the South—from the viewpoint of Tarleton's commander. *Rise and Fight Again* by Charles B. Flood (1976) ably discusses the influence of Cowpens and other Southern battles on the ultimate decision at Yorktown.

—*Thomas J. Fleming*

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[4-5](#), [8-9](#): William A. Bake

[10-11](#): “The Battle of Cowpens,” by Francis Kimmelmeyer, 1809. Yale University.

[13](#): Portrait of Gates by Charles Willson Peale. Collection of Independence National Historical Park.

Cornwallis by Thomas Gainsborough, National Portrait Gallery, London.

[14](#): Daniel Morgan by CWPeale. Independence NHP.

[18](#): Nathanael Greene by CWPeale. Independence NHP.

[19](#): Thomas Sumter by Rembrandt Peale. Independence NHP.

[20](#): Francis Marion, a detail from a painting by John B. White. Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection, Brown University Library.

[21](#): Elijah Clarke, Georgia Department of Archives and History.

[23](#): New-York Historical Society.

[24](#): Banastre Tarleton by Sir Joshua Reynolds. National Portrait Gallery, London.

[25](#): Mary Robinson, an engraving after a painting by Reynolds. Collection of Sir John Tilney. Tarleton birthplace. Liverpool City Libraries.

[26](#): Benjamin Lincoln by CW Peale. Independence NHP.

[27](#): Library of Congress

[28](#): Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection, Brown University Library.

[29](#): Library of Congress

[30](#): Map from Francis V. Greene, *General Greene* (1893).

[31](#): Alexander Leslie by Gainsborough. Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh.

[33](#): National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.

[36-37](#) (except pistols), [47](#) (fife), [56-57](#): The George C. Neumann Collection, a gift of the Sun Company to Valley Forge National Historical Park, 1978.

Dragoon pistol: The Smithsonian Institution.

Officer’s pistol: Fort Pitt Museum.

[48-49](#): all by Don Troiani except the 17th Light Dragoon, which is by Gerry Embleton.

[52-53](#): Maryland Historical Society

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[64-65](#): Don Troiani.

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