**Getting Around Cowpens Battlefield**

Cowpens National Battlefield is open daily from dawn to dusk. Visitor center parking is available from 9 am to 5 pm. For other hours, use the trailhead parking one mile east of the park gate.

**Visitor Center** Start here for information, exhibits, and a bookstore. You can see a fiber-optic map display, a film, “Cowpens: A Battle Remembered,” and a museum with authentic Revolutionary War weapons and a full-size reproduction of a British 3-pounder Grasshopper cannon. Open daily except Thanksgiving, December 25, and January 1.

**Auto Loop Road** The three-mile loop around the perimeter of the battlefield features wayside exhibits, overlooks, and short trails to the Green River Road, the battlefield, and the Robert Scruggs House, an early 1800s log cabin. ***Note:* The loop road and picnic area close at 4:30 pm.**

**Battlefield Trail** A 1.25-mile self-guiding walking tour begins and ends at the visitor center. The trail includes the Green River Road along which the battle was fought. This portion of the original road is one of the few that still exists.

**Regulations and Safety Tips**

* Use caution when driving the loop road. Watch for pedestrians and bicyclists.
* Bicycles are allowed on the loop road and parking areas only. Bicyclists must wear helmets, travel in the same direction as traffic, and use the bike lane to allow vehicles to pass. There is a bicycle rack at the visitor center parking lot.
* Pets are not allowed in buildings. They must be attended at all times and be on leashes no longer than six feet.
* Park and picnic only in designated areas.
* It is a violation of federal law to climb on monuments.

**More Information**

Cowpens National Battlefield

P.O. Box 308

Chesnee, SC 29323

864-461-2828

[www.nps.gov/cowp](http://www.nps.gov/cowp)

Cowpens National Battlefield is one of over 390 parks in the National Park System. To learn more about national parks visit [www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov).

On this field on January 17, 1781, Daniel Morgan led his army of tough Continentals and backwoods militia to a brilliant victory over Banastre Tarleton’s large force of British regulars. When he marched his army onto this field the previous afternoon, Morgan was trying to elude a British trap. That morning, as his men cooked breakfast in camp on Thicketty Creek, scouts brought news that Tarleton had crossed the Pacolet River, 12 miles south, and was coming up fast. Morgan broke camp immediately and ordered his soldiers down the road. Their destination: the Cow Pens, a frontier pasturing ground on the road to a ford across the Broad River six miles to the northwest. Morgan was in a precarious position. If he crossed the river most of his militia would probably desert him. If Tarleton caught the Americans on the road or astride the river, they could all be cut down. Morgan chose to stand and fight.

Who was this tactical genius behind the victory at the Cow Pens? Daniel Morgan was a self-made man. Before he was 20 he was hauling freight on poorly defined roads over the mountains of Virginia. During the French and Indian War he served as a teamster in the British army and accompanied Gen. Edward Braddock’s ill-fated 1755 expedition against Fort Duquesne. In 1756 he struck a British officer and was sentenced to 500 lashes with a cat-o’-nine tails, a punishment that had killed lesser men. He later claimed that the British still owed him one lash. When the Revolutionary War began, he led a unit of Virginia sharpshooters to Boston, where they joined with the Continental Army and, in the winter of 1775, took part in an abortive attack on Quebec. Captured and exchanged, Morgan recruited another unit of Virginia sharpshooters and joined Maj. Gen. Horatio Gates’s army in time to play a decisive role in winning the two battles of Saratoga on September 19 and October 7, 1777. In July 1779, passed over for promotion, he left the Army and returned to Virginia.

Morgan rejoined the army in September 1780 after Gates, who had been given command of Continental forces in the South, suffered a disastrous defeat at Camden, S.C. Promoted to brigadier general, Morgan was commanding a corps of light troops when Maj. Gen. Nathanael Greene replaced Gates in early December and set about recovering American military fortunes. Greene’s strategy was to divide his own army and force the British to split theirs. To accomplish this, he sent Morgan with a detachment known as the “Flying Army” into western South Carolina to operate on the British left flank and rear, threatening their outposts and giving “protection to that part of the country and to spirit up the people.”

To remove the threat that Morgan’s presence created, the British commander in the South, Maj. Gen. Charles Cornwallis, sent Banastre Tarleton with the British Legion and some of his best light troops. Tarleton, the son of a British merchant, had purchased his commission in the British Army. The Legion was known for its brutality in cutting down unarmed or fleeing soldiers. Tarleton himself was widely hated in South Carolina after his troops butchered Col. Abraham Buford’s surrendered Continentals at Waxhaws in May 1780. When Cornwallis sent his 26-year-old cavalryman after Morgan, he helped set the stage for a confrontation between two of the Revolutionary War’s most colorful commanders.

Morgan knew that Tarleton’s force outnumbered his own. To help even the odds, he sent for militia units from South Carolina, North Carolina, and Georgia—men who had fought at Musgrove Mill, Kings Mountain, Kettle Creek, and Williamson’s Plantation, men who had fought in fierce hand-to-hand combat with Indians to protect their homes. These were men of great courage and experience, but Morgan knew they were no match for British battle tactics. The rifles they carried would not mount a bayonet, making them defenseless in the face of a bayonet attack or a mounted charge by dragoons. The militia’s strength lay in their prowess with their rifle, a weapon of far greater range and, in their hands, deadlier and more accurate than the British muskets. Morgan kept this in mind as he devised a plan of battle to match the strengths of his men and the terrain.

Morgan wisely chose to fight in an open wood on ground that sloped gently toward the southeast, the direction from which the British would approach. The field had three low crests separated by wide swales. A road, later known as the Green River Road, curved through the area. Morgan formed his troops in three lines straddling the road. In the front line he placed sharpshooters in small groups. Their job: slow Tarleton’s advance with well-aimed fire, then fall back. Ninety yards behind the sharpshooters he put the regional militia, under Andrew Pickens. Morgan asked them for two volleys at a killing distance; then they were free to withdraw behind the Continentals. About 150 yards behind Pickens, stretching along the forward crest, were his crack Maryland and Delaware Continentals and veteran Virginia militia, about 600 men commanded by John Eager Howard. Behind that crest, he stationed the cavalry, approximately 150 men under William Washington, with orders to protect the militia and be ready to ride into the fight.

Just before dawn the British came into full view of the American front line. After sending cavalry forward to drive in the sharpshooters, Tarleton formed and advanced his line of battle—infantry astride the road; on each flank, 50 dragoons; in reserve, a brigade of Highlanders and 200 cavalry. As the British came within range, the main militia line delivered a deadly fire, dropping two-thirds of the officers, then withdrew behind the Continental line. The dragoons on the British right pursued the militia but were driven back in a fierce charge by Washington’s cavalry.

The British surged onto the third line, and the fighting became pitched. The Highlanders threatened to outflank the American right. At this point began a confused tangle of events that soon brought the fighting to a dramatic conclusion. When Howard ordered his right to fall back and form a new front, the order was misinterpreted and the whole line began to retreat.

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

The battle was over in less than an hour. British losses were staggering: 110 killed, 229 wounded, and 600 captured or missing. Also captured with the British were a number of slaves. Morgan’s losses were 24 killed and 104 wounded. The “Old Waggoner’s” unorthodox tactical masterpiece had indeed “spirited up the people,” not just those of the backcountry Carolinas but those in all the colonies. In the process, as Morgan later told a friend, he had given Tarleton and the British a “devil of a whipping.”

**The Southern Campaign, 1778–1781**

**New Hope for the American Revolution**

By the time the Battle of Cowpens was fought, the lower South had become the decisive theater 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 that summer, most of South Carolina was pacified, and a powerful British army under Lord Cornwallis was poised to sweep across the Carolinas into Virginia. This map traces the marches of Cornwallis *(in red)* and his adversary Nathanael Greene *(in blue)*. The campaign opened at Charleston in August 1780, when Cornwallis marched north to confront Horatio Gates at Camden. It ended at Yorktown in October 1781 with Cornwallis’s surrender of the main British army in America. In between were months of some of the hardest campaigning and most savage fighting of the war.

**Chain of Command**

**The Commanders**

***Daniel Morgan -*** Morgan was a frontiersman, a teamster by trade, experienced at fighting Indians, and something of a genius at leading men in battle. When at age 45 he took command of Nathanael Greene’s light troops in 1780, he was already well-known for his military abilities, having fought with distinction at Quebec in 1775 and at Saratoga in 1777. After Morgan left the army in February 1781 due to illness, Greene remarked: “Great generals are scarce —there are few Morgans to be found.”

***Banastre Tarleton -*** Tarleton had a reputation for being ruthless and fearless in battle. An offspring of British gentry, he was schooled at Oxford University, and at 21 became an officer of dragoons. He volunteered for service in America and campaigned with some distinction in the north. In his mid-20s he found himself commander of the British Legion, a mobile striking force of cavalry and infantry. American propagandists vilified him. Decades after the war American writers nicknamed him “Bloody Tarleton.”

**Morgan’s Army**

Militia

Morgan’s militia were tough and experienced. Some 200 were ex-Continentals from Virginia under Maj. Francis Triplett. Others were recruits from Georgia and the Carolinas commanded by the wily partisan Col. Andrew Pickens. Morgan knew the worth of these troops and deployed them in a way that made the most of their strengths and minimized their weaknesses. They rewarded him with a victory still marveled at over 200 years later.

Continentals

Lt. Col. John Eager Howard’s battalion of Maryland and Delaware Continentals fought courageously at Cowpens and afterwards. Nathanael Greene called Howard “as good an officer as the world affords.” The Maryland unit was one of the few regiments to fight in both the Northern and Southern campaigns. By war’s end, the Delaware Continentals attained a reputation as one of the elite light infantry units of the Southern Army.

Cavalry

Few officers saw more combat than Lt. Col. William Washington, a second cousin of George Washington, the commanding general. A veteran of numerous battles and skirmishes, he and his Third Continental Dragoons were the main reserve at Cowpens. Hidden by the terrain behind the Continental line, they were sufficiently near “as to be able to charge the enemy, should they be broken.”

**Tarleton’s Army**

Legion Cavalry

This green-uniformed unit was the mounted arm of Tarleton’s British Legion. As constituted at Cowpens, it was a mixture of loyalists and American prisoners of war from Camden, armed with saber, pistol, and attitude.

16th Light Infantry

This detachment from the 16th Regiment of Foot was composed of men selected for their agility and endurance. These were crack troops, most of whom had been fighting in America since the beginning of the war.

7th Royal Fusiliers

Although drawn from the 7th Regiment of Foot, one of the oldest regiments in the British Army, this battalion was composed of untested new recruits only partially trained.

Royal Artillery

Eighteen royal artillerymen were responsible for the two light cannon that accompanied Tarleton’s force. These guns, which may have been captured from the patriots at the Battle of Camden, helped to boost Tarleton’s confidence in confronting Morgan at Cowpens.

71st Highlanders

Known as Fraser’s Highlanders, this elite regiment was raised for duty in America and saw extensive service in the Northern Theater before being transferred to the South in 1780. The regiment fought valiantly at the Siege of Savannah and in subsequent operations in South Carolina.

17th Light Dragoons

The excellence of this regiment made it the first cavalry corps selected for service in America in 1775. Detachments were present in most of the important engagements throughout the war. The men were a model of discipline for other cavalry troops raised by the British in America during the war.