

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 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 the river, they could all be cut down. Morgan chose to stand and fight.

Who was Daniel Morgan, this tactical genius behind the victory at Cow Pens? Before age 20 he was hauling freight on poorly defined roads over Virginia's mountains. In the French and Indian War (1754–1763) 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 hit 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 the British still owed him one lash.)

When the Revolutionary War began, he led a unit of Virginia sharpshooters to Boston, where they joined 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' army in a decisive role in winning battles at Saratoga on September 19 and October 7, 1777. In July 1779, passed over for promotion, he left the army and returned to Virginia.

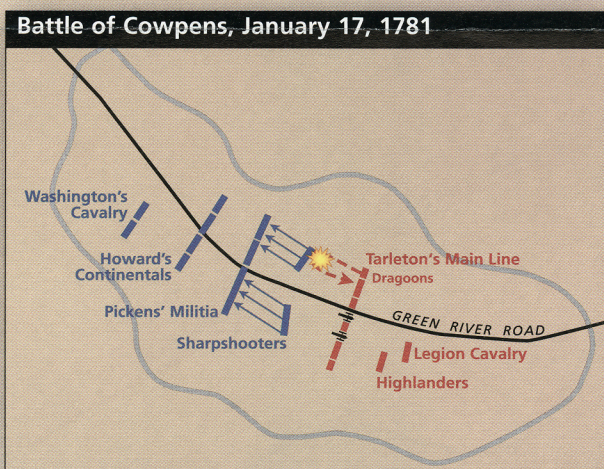
In September 1780 Morgan rejoined the army after Gates, who had been given command of Continental forces in the South, suffered a defeat at Camden, S.C. Promoted to brigadier general, Morgan was commanding a corps of light troops when Maj.

Gen. Nathanael Greene replaced Gates in early December and set about recovering American military fortunes. Greene's strategy was to divide his army and force the British to split theirs. He sent Morgan with a detachment called 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 of Morgan's presence, Maj. Gen. Charles Cornwallis, British commander in the South, sent Banastre Tarleton with the British Legion and some of his best light troops. The British Legion was known for its brutality in cutting down unarmed or fleeing soldiers. Tarleton was widely hated in South Carolina after his troops butchered Col. Abraham Buford's surrendered Continentals at Waxhaws in May 1780. When Cornwallis sent Tarleton after Morgan, he set the stage for a confrontation between two of the War's most colorful commanders.

Morgan knew that Tarleton's force outnumbered his own. To 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, and who had fought to protect their homes in hand-to-hand combat with Indians. These were men of courage and experience, but Morgan knew they were no match for British battle tactics. Their rifles could not mount a bayonet, making them defenseless against a bayonet attack or a mounted charge by dragoons. The militia's strength lay in its prowess with rifles—weapons with greater range and, in their hands, deadlier and more accurate than British muskets. Morgan, keeping this in mind, devised a battle to match the strengths of his men and the terrain.

Morgan chose to fight in an open wood on ground that sloped gently southeast, the direction from which the British would approach. The field had three low crests separated by wide swales. The road, later called Green River Road, curved through the area. Morgan formed his troops in three lines straddling the road (*see Battle of Cowpens below*). In the front line, sharpshooters stood in small groups. Their job was to slow Tarleton's advance with well-aimed fire, then fall back. The second line, 90 yards behind the sharpshooters, included Andrew Pickens' regional militia. Morgan asked them for two volleys at a "killing distance," then they were to fall behind the Continentals. In the third line, 150 yards behind Pickens and stretching along the forward crest, were John Eager Howard's 600 crack Maryland and Delaware Continentals and veteran Virginia militia. Behind that crest, Morgan stationed 150 cavalymen under command of William Washington, with orders to protect the militia and be ready to fight.



Just before dawn the British came into full view of the American front line. Tarleton sent cavalry to drive back the American sharpshooters, then he 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 Pickens' militia line fired, dropping two-thirds of the British officers, then withdrew behind the Continental line. The British dragoons on the right pursued the militia but were driven back in a fierce charge by Washington's cavalry.

The British surged onto Howard's line, the fighting pitched. Highlanders threatened to outflank the American right. Then a confused tangle of events brought the fighting to a dramatic conclusion. Howard ordered his right flank to fall back and form a new front, but his order was misinterpreted—and the entire line began to retreat.

Seeing this Morgan rode up and chose new ground where the Continentals could rally. Reaching that point, the men faced about and fired point-blank at the closing redcoats, then plunged into the staggered ranks with bayonets (*see painting above*). As this was happening, Washington's cavalry rode into the swirling fight—while on the British left, Pickens' militia opened a galling fire on the dragoons and Highlanders. British resistance quickly collapsed. A few dragoons rallied to Tarleton, but they were ineffective and followed the British Legion cavalry, which never joined the fight, in a pell-mell dash off the field.

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