



Before we think about the Battle of Cowpens, which the Patriots won against the British (who were led by Banastre Tarleton), let's examine the word "Cowpens."

If we break the word in two, we have "cow pens." Does that have something to do with the battle scene? As it happens, the answer is "yes"—and—the term "cowpens" is associated with South Carolina (where the Battle of Cowpens was fought).

The U.S. Park Service tells us about the meaning of "cowpens," as it was used during the Revolutionary-War era:

A term, endemic to South Carolina, referring to open-range stock grazing operations of the colonial period. These were usually cleared areas, 100 to 400 acres in extent. Many, in eastern South Carolina, were known for their native canebrakes. Piedmont pastures, though less numerous, often contained peavine. ["Peavine" is a legume often found in piedmont South Carolina cowpens.]

The battle of Cowpens (January 17, 1781) occurred in two phases:

- The British attack was phase one;
- The American counterattack was phase two.

Now for the battle story.

General Daniel Morgan decided to take a stand against the Redcoats at Cowpens, even though this meant his troops could be boxed-in by the Broad River located about six miles away.

The Broad—which begins in North Carolina's mountains and flows southeast, joining the Saluda to form the Congaree River—was flood-swollen on January 17, 1781. Perhaps General Morgan—considered, by some historians, to be "the most successful field leader of the American Revolution"—thought the river was far-enough away from the Cowpens crossroads so as not to endanger his men.

The field, at Cowpens, was a good place to confront Tarleton and his troops. The U.S. National Park Service tells us why:

The field itself was some 500 yards long and just as wide, a park-like setting dotted with trees, but devoid of undergrowth, having been kept clear by cattle grazing in the spring on native grasses and peavine.

Calling for American militia (or part-time soldiers who sometimes fought with the Continental Army) to support his efforts, Morgan—who was also known as "Old Wagoner" because he served as a wagon driver during the French and Indian War—rallied the troops the night before the battle:

Camp was made in a swale between two small hills, and through the night Andrew Pickens' militia drifted into camp.

Morgan moved among the campfires and offered encouragement; his speeches to militia and Continentals alike were command performances. He spoke emotionally of past battles, talked of the battle plan, and lashed out against the British.

His words were especially effective with the militia. The "Old Waggoner" of French and Indian War days and the hero of Saratoga, spoke their language. He knew how to motivate them even proposing a competition of bravery between Georgia and Carolina units.

By the time he was through, one soldier observed that the army was "in good spirits and very willing to fight". But, as one observed, Morgan hardly slept a wink that night.

The weather was clear, but really cold, on the morning of January 17. When Morgan's scouts arrived, they told their General that Tarleton was on his way.

The British General, who would make an assault on the gathered Patriots, was thrilled at the spot Morgan had chosen for battle. He knew that the Broad River was behind the Americans. He also knew that members of the colonial militia had a tendency to run-away from battles where they faced British bayonets.

With the river behind them, this time, how could the militia flee?

As Tarleton ordered his men to charge, he (and they) were initially unaware that Patriot sharpshooters were hidden from view. The Patriots a good vantage point to do what they especially liked to do: pick-off the British officers.

The U.S. National Park Service tells us what happened as the battle began:

Tarleton pressed the attack head on, his line extending across the meadow, his artillery in the middle, and fifty Dragoons on each side.

It was as if Morgan knew he would make a frontal assault - it was his style of fighting. To face Tarleton, he [Morgan] organized his troops into three lines. First, out front and hiding behind trees were selected sharpshooters. At the onset of battle they picked off numbers of Tarleton's Dragoons, traditionally listed as fifteen, shooting especially at officers, and warding off an attempt to gain initial supremacy.

With the Dragoons in retreat, and their initial part completed, the sharpshooters retreated 150 yards or more back to join the second line, the militia commanded by Andrew Pickens. Morgan used the militia well, asking them to get off two volleys and promised their retreat to the third line made up of John Eager Howard's 25 Continentals [paid American soldiers], again close to 150 yards back.

Some of the militia indeed got off two volleys as the British neared, but, as they retreated and reached supposed safety behind the Continental line, Tarleton sent his feared Dragoons after them.

Things may have gone differently for the Patriots, with the militia trying to cut and run even though the Broad River was behind them, except a major turning-point—not just for the Battle of Cowpens but for the Revolutionary War itself—was about to occur:

As the militia dodged behind trees and parried saber slashes with their rifles, William Washington's Patriot cavalry thundered onto the field of battle, seemingly, out of nowhere. The surprised British Dragoons, already scattered and sensing a rout [in their favor], were overwhelmed, and according to historian Babits, lost eighteen men in the clash.

As they fled the field, infantry on both sides fired volley after volley. The British advanced in a trot, with beating drums, the shrill sounds of fifes, and shouts of halloo. Morgan, in response, cheering his men on, [is] said to give them the Indian halloo back.

Riding to the front, he rallied the militia, crying out, "form, form, my brave fellows! Old Morgan was never beaten!"

And ... "Old Morgan" was not beaten at Cowpens, although the Redcoats believed that would be the result. The commander had to clear-up what was thought to be a Patriot retreat order, telling his regrouped men, led by John Eager Howard, to turn and fire their weapons en masse (instead of retreating):

Morgan's strategy was to place the untrained militia in front of the Continentals with orders to get off two good shots and then retreat. Both Morgan and Howard explained to the Continentals the planned militia retreat so that they would not be alarmed.

The first two lines followed orders and retreated as planned. Then after the Continentals and the British had been fighting fiercely for several minutes, Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton ordered his reserves, Fraser's 71st Highlanders, to advance toward Howard's line.

Howard, realizing that his right flank was exposed to the enemy, attempted to change the front of the company on the right. He ordered his right flank, which was composed of Virginia militia, to wheel backward and to the right to face the enemy.

In the noise and confusion of battle, the soldiers misunderstood Howard's order for the Virginia militia, and the entire line began an orderly retreat.

Howard maintained control and, when Morgan questioned him about the retreat, he pointed out to Morgan that the line was retreating in good order [and] was not beaten. He [Howard] then followed Morgan's order and had the Continentals continue their retreat to the rising ground and face about and fire.

As his men faced about, Howard reported that they remained uncommonly cool and gave the British "an unexpected and deadly fire."

Taking advantage of the disorder of the British lines, Howard ordered a bayonet charge. The Americans executed a double envelopment, a classic military maneuver in which the enemy's flanks are turned, and won the battle in a little less than an hour. (See the U.S. National Park Service's [biography on John Eager Howard](#).)

This time, it was the Redcoats who fled, not the American militia:

Morgan wrote of Howard's performance at the Battle of Cowpens: "[Howard's attack] was done with such address that the enemy fled with the utmost precipitation.... We pushed our advantages so effectually, that they never had an opportunity of rallying." (Quoted in the [Park Service's biography of Howard](#).)

The Battle of Cowpens—portrayed in the movie “The Patriot”—was a turning-point for the American forces. It helped to lay a major stone in the path to Yorktown (where Lord Cornwallis would ultimately surrender to General Washington).

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Annotated map, courtesy United States Military Academy.

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