

## Early American Wars: *Cowpens*

**DATE:**  
January 17, 1781

**LOCATION:**  
Cowpens, South Carolina



### OPPOSING FORCES

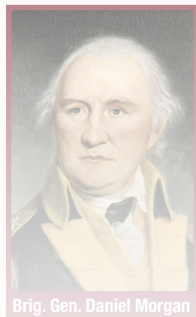
**American Continental Army:** 1,065 Continental infantry, cavalry, and militia under the command of Brig. Gen. Daniel Morgan. Subordinate commanders included Col. Andrew Pickens of the militia, Lt. Col. John Eager Howard of the Continentals, and Brig. Gen. William Washington of the cavalry.

**Reinforced British Legion:** 1,150 British Regulars, Loyalist militia, cavalry, and artillery under Lt. Col. Banastre Tarleton. Maj. Arthur MacArthur commanded the 71st Regiment of Foot, Fraser's Highlanders. Maj. Timothy Newmarsh commanded the 7th Regiment of Foot, Royal Fusiliers.



### HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

By the summer of 1780, Great Britain held the advantage in the American Revolution. A strategic shift to the south had borne fruit. British forces controlled the major ports of Savannah and Charleston, and Maj. Gen. Charles Cornwallis had recently trounced American forces under Gen. Horatio Gates at Camden, South Carolina. This crushing defeat set the stage for a potential death blow to the American Revolution in the south.



Brig. Gen. Daniel Morgan

But Gen. Nathanael Greene, Gen. George Washington's newly appointed southern commander, had other ideas. Greene, who would never win a battle but would be instrumental in winning a war, got off to an unconventional start. Instead of massing his forces, he divided them, sending Brig. Gen. Daniel Morgan southwestward.

When British forces caught up to Morgan at Cowpens in January 1781, he was more

than ready. Morgan's victory was a tactical masterpiece, echoing Hannibal's ancient triumph over the Romans at Cannae. Cowpens set in motion a chain of events leading to Yorktown and, ultimately, American independence.

costs roiled discontent among the British people and, more urgently, members of Parliament. British leaders hoped to break the stalemate in the Colonies by looking south. They believed Loyalist (Tory) sympathies were stronger there, that moderate weather would allow a longer campaigning season, and that American military organization in the region was questionable. It seemed a southern offensive might hold the key to victory.

In the autumn of 1778, Gen. Sir Henry Clinton, commander of British forces in North America, made his move. Soon Georgia and South Carolina fell under British control. Convinced that the situation was progressing well, Clinton returned to New York City and left his subordinate, Cornwallis, to conduct a potentially war-winning campaign in the Carolinas and Virginia.

Following a series of victories, Cornwallis appeared on the verge of complete triumph. However, he became distracted by increasing guerrilla activity in the Carolina backcountry. Bands of rebels attacked British supply trains and disrupted communications. As Cornwallis reacted to this new threat, his opportunity to bring on a decisive battle slipped away. In October 1780, a contingent of American "Overmountain" militiamen and Continental soldiers routed a Tory force at the Battle of Kings Mountain. Cornwallis's frustration grew.

Greene took command of the Continental Army in the south in December and ordered Morgan to move southwest. Cornwallis worried that his left flank was endangered and that Morgan threatened Ninety Six, a frontier bastion that bolstered Tory morale and stood watch in the west.

Cornwallis faced a dilemma. He could keep his army together, ignore Morgan for the time being, and confront Greene with

his entire force, while accepting the risk that Ninety Six and his flank were vulnerable. Or, he could divide his army, deal with both Greene and Morgan, and defeat them individually. Cornwallis decided on the latter, sending Lt. Col. Banastre Tarleton to pursue Morgan.



The 26-year-old Tarleton, an impetuous and ruthless commander, wasted no time pursuing



### STRATEGY & MANEUVER

Actions by the British — After three years of fighting in the