

Southern Campaign Introduction for Rail Overlooking the Battlefield

The battle of Cowpens was one of the key battles of the Revolutionary War; but to better understand its importance, we should step back and examine what led up to it.

The War of the American Revolution began outside of Boston, Massachusetts, in April 1775, when British troops attempted to seize American leaders along with arms and ammunition. The British occupied New York City and Philadelphia and won most of the major battles; but they failed to destroy George Washington's Continental Army, and as soon as a British army left an area, Patriot militia re-established control of the countryside.

In October 1777, at Saratoga in Northern New York State, the British general Gentleman Johnny Burgoyne surrendered his army to a continental army commanded by Major General Horatio Gates. This great American victory marked the turning point of the war, for it made certain that France would enter the conflict as an American ally, and without French aid America could not have won the war. Britain believed that there were vast numbers of loyalists, or Tories, in the Southern backcountry who would rise to support British rule once a British army appeared. The British plan was to conquer Georgia, then South Carolina, and then roll northward into North Carolina and Virginia. Behind the British army loyalist regulars and militia would maintain the control established by the British army.

The British began their Southern Campaign in 1778 through 1779 by occupying Savannah, Georgia, and establishing control over the rest of the state. In 1780, their main effort began. A British expeditionary force numbering 8,500 soldiers landed in South Carolina. In May of that year the richest city in the thirteen states, Charleston, South Carolina surrendered to the British, and lost with the great city was the only Continental Army in the South.

South Carolinians were shocked. Their state lay defenseless before the world's greatest military power. All seemed lost as British columns marched westward into the vast backcountry, which then began about fifty miles west of Charleston. Garrisons were established at strong points, beginning at Cheraw near the North Carolina line and extending in a wide arc at Camden, Hanging Rock, and Ninety Six. The way seemed clear for the next stage in the British plan - the invasion and the re-conquest of North Carolina.

Then a funny thing happened to British on the way to victory. The plain people of the backcountry rose against their would-be conquerors. The patriot militia engaged in sweeping war of movement made possible by their horses. They were mounted warriors, and a high British officer stated that is why "we have never been able to bring them to a decisive action." Under gifted leaders the Patriots waged one of history's most successful guerilla campaigns of hit and run attacks that stopped the British pacification efforts in its tracks. At Cedar Springs, the Battle of Huck's Defeat, Thicketty Fort, Hanging Rock, Musgrove's Mill and dozens of other actions the patriots routed loyalist regulars and militia. Not even another American calamity made them quit the field.

On 7 October 1780, 470 partisans from the Carolina backcountry joined by 440 Overmountain men from over the Appalachian Mountains, on the cutting edge of the American frontier, gathered at

the foot of Kings Mountain in South Carolina. Major Ferguson and his 1,125 troops were on the ridge on top on Kings Mountain. The partisans surrounded the mountain and attacked. They killed Major Ferguson and destroyed his force. They killed 157 loyalists, left 63 too badly wounded to be moved, and took 698 prisoners.

The loyalists of the backcountry never recovered from Ferguson's catastrophe, and it left Lord Cornwallis' left flank wide open to attack by the partisans; and, in fact, His Lordship believed that thousands of partisans were moving to attack him. This was not true, but Cornwallis did not know this.

On 3 December 1780, Major General Nathanael Greene of Rhode Island succeeded Horatio Gates as Commander of the Southern Department. Greene was everything that Gates was not – a brilliant strategist, a good field commander, and a master of the military arts of geography, supply, and transport. Greene also had a secret weapon – the finest combat commander of the war, Brigadier General Daniel Morgan.

While Greene took the main army eastward to the Cheraw region for retraining and refitting, he sent Morgan with the cream of the army, 600-strong, west across the Catawba River to the western backcountry to engage the enemy and encourage the patriots in that quarter, or as Greene put it, "Spirit up the people."

Morgan's movements, especially a long distance raid by his cavalry in cooperation with patriot horsemen, alarmed Cornwallis, who thought that the important British stronghold of Ninety Six was in danger. He immediately ordered his feared commander of cavalry, Lt. Col. Banastre Tarleton, to take a force of British and provincial regulars and pursue Morgan.

Thus began a deadly pursuit in the harsh and unforgiving backcountry of South Carolina during the water-soaked winter of 1781. It led directly to this place and this time: Cowpens, 17 January, 1781.